



Charity

Frontline Worker Survey 2026

Full report and
recommendations



Frontline
Network

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Listening, Valuing and Acting

Ask anyone who has experienced and moved on from homelessness what made the difference, and invariably they will say it was the frontline support worker. They will give the name of the specific person who helped. The person who listened, cared, built their trust and who worked with them to understand their situation, what had happened, but more importantly where they wanted to get to and what they needed to get there.

The person who then battled with any number of agencies to enable them to move into accommodation, to be able to access health and other services, to get the benefits and other support they needed. And perhaps most importantly, who gave them hope and confidence and the prospect of a brighter future away from homelessness.

That relationship may have been short and sharp or over a number of months but it will have involved empathy, patience, persistence and all manner of skill and experience by the frontline worker in how to negotiate the system and to advocate and argue for the support needed.

Yet despite all of this we know frontline homelessness staff are too often overlooked, undervalued, overworked and underpaid. That's why at St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity we believe it is vital to understand, hear and act on the voice of frontline workers. This is the 9th survey we have conducted but this year it's arguably more important than ever. We estimate that the insights of more than 20,000 people who have experienced homelessness sit behind what frontline workers have shared in their responses.

At a time when the Prime Minister and Government have made very welcome commitments that rough sleeping and homelessness can and will be tackled this report is a timely call to arms. We have a skilled and experienced workforce ready to step-up and to deliver and we also know from this report where employing organisations are getting it right in terms of valuing and supporting their staff. But they cannot do it alone.

The government must invest in ensuring the appropriate and affordable housing, sufficient level of local housing allowance and homelessness and wider public services are all there to enable frontline workers to be able to do their job to best support people out of homelessness.

Coming through loud and clear from the wealth of insight and experience contained in this report is that frontline workers know how to solve homelessness and rough sleeping and they have a huge sense of achievement in doing so. But sadly, they are facing increasing barriers. Too often there is not the appropriate, suitable and affordable accommodation available to support people into, and there are barriers preventing them from getting access to the services they know will make a difference to those they are supporting. And this takes its toll. Firstly, on those experiencing homelessness, and secondly on those supporting them. Frontline workers often have no option but to put people into situations that they know will not best resolve their situation. That is harming their wellbeing and, combined with pay levels that don't meet costs or reflect the time and experience they put in, are causing burnout and worry. Too many feel they may leave the profession, taking all of that skill and experience with them.

This only worsens the situation for the thousands of people facing homelessness who need support.

This report makes clear that frontline workers have the empathy, expertise and experience to support people out of homelessness in the most challenging circumstances – they need to be valued, listened to and appropriately paid and supported. If we do that, then we can all look forward to a country that has tackled rough sleeping and homelessness for good.

Duncan Shrubsole

CEO, St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity

Introduction

This is the ninth annual survey of frontline workers across the homelessness sector run by St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity. The survey looks at their experiences of supporting people in the current housing and homelessness sector, as well as their workforce-related issues.

St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity facilitates the national Frontline Network of homelessness workers. It also provides support to regional networks across the UK, run by partner organisations, which bring together frontline workers to support each other locally.

Policy context

The survey was open in spring 2026, during a period of significant policy change across the UK.

In England, the Renters' Rights Act was about to be implemented following the announcement of the government's National Plan to End Homelessness in December 2025.

The plan set out a preventative approach alongside action to improve responses when homelessness does occur. In Wales, the Homelessness and Social Housing Allocation (Wales) Act became law on 1 April 2026. The Act is prevention-focused and included the new duty to 'ask and act' when someone is homeless or at risk. In Scotland, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 became law on 6 November 2025, introducing major reforms to rent control, tenants' rights and homelessness prevention.

In Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive was in the final year of its Homelessness Strategy which is prevention-focused, aiming to ensure people get help before they lose their home.

The survey responses come from different policy contexts, but many of the same challenges appear across all four nations. The lack of affordable housing, frozen LHA rates and funding pressures are challenges they are all facing, regardless of the policy framework in each nation.



Method

The survey ran from 9 March 2026 to 1 May 2026. It included a mixture of quantitative (closed) and qualitative (open) questions.

We invited frontline workers in the homelessness sector to complete the survey, by publishing it through a variety of channels. Respondents chose whether to complete the survey, so the sample was self-selecting. We defined a 'frontline worker' broadly, as anyone who regularly provides direct support to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, whether as part of or all of their role.

A total of 1,229 people responded to the survey, providing a detailed and nuanced evidence base for the insights presented in this report. All but 8 reported directly supporting people experiencing homelessness in the previous month.

Around two-thirds reported supporting between 10 and 49 people during that period, while more than 200 reported supporting 50 or more (see Appendix 1). This means the findings draw on frontline workers' experience from many thousands of recent interactions with individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In total, there were over 10,000 open text comments across the whole survey. These have helped us to identify and explore the themes and challenges described in this report.

The quotes included in this report are all taken from these text comments, and thus are all the direct comments of frontline workers. Each quote is anonymised but credited to the location in the UK and type of organisation the frontline worker is working for.

About three quarters of respondents (**76%**) were based in England; **5%** in Northern Ireland; **9%** in Scotland; and **11%** in Wales. Just over half (**51%**) worked in charities (which were not registered social landlords); **21%** in Housing Associations/Registered Social Landlords; **15%** in Local Government; and smaller proportions in health, community organisations or other types of organisation.

The largest group (**44%**) had 10 or more years of experience in the homelessness sector. Over a quarter (**27%**) of respondents had lived experience of homelessness.

Appendix 1 gives more detailed breakdowns of key characteristics of the respondents.





Section 1 –

Homelessness



'We are seeing more homeless/at-risk-of-homelessness families who have been evicted through no fault of their own. They are not able to find another property due to high rents, low LHA rates and no guarantor. The rents are continuing to rise, the LHA rates are the same for more than a year, and there is a lack of social housing. The number in this situation is increasing, and all we can offer is support and a sticking plaster if we are lucky.'

Frontline worker, Southend-on-Sea, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord



Section 1 –

Homelessness

Frontline workers told us that demand is increasing while shortages of suitable and affordable housing are becoming more acute. The problem is not only whether accommodation exists, it also needs to be suitable, affordable, and accessible for the person who needs it.

When housing isn't available that meets those conditions, people can't move on and the system becomes gridlocked, preventing people at all stages from accessing the accommodation they need.

Together with stretched support services, these constraints are limiting the options available to help people away from homelessness. Respondents described what they can do within these constraints, where prevention is working and what they thought the outlook was for homelessness over the next few years. But they were also clear that they often know what housing or support someone needs, without having the options or resources to act on that judgement.



1.1 Availability of suitable accommodation

To help people away from homelessness, housing needs to be available and it needs to be suitable.

Our survey respondents reported that there is not enough housing that meets the circumstances and needs of the people they are supporting. What makes accommodation suitable varies from person to person. It needs to be somewhere that a person or family can realistically move into and sustain, taking account of their needs and circumstances. The more specific someone's housing or support needs are, the smaller the pool of accommodation that may work for them.

System-wide housing shortages were frequently cited by frontline workers as a cause of rising demand for homelessness services. **85% of respondents reported challenges accessing suitable accommodation for clients and 52% felt this had got harder in the last 12 months. 85% said social housing was difficult to access. Less than 3% of respondents reported that it was easy to access private rented accommodation.** When compared with previous years, these figures show that the challenges remain persistently high. Respondents said these shortages limit how they can both support people into accommodation and provide appropriate support alongside accommodation for those who need it.

Many comments were about a lack of accommodation, including a lack of suitable accommodation. Respondents described many different reasons why otherwise available accommodation might not be suitable.



'Accessing suitable accommodation is very difficult for many of my clients (particularly those with accessibility needs such as wheelchair users) and seems to only be getting more difficult'

Ceredigion, Charity

Another example was supported accommodation and private rental accommodation able to accept pets. For many clients 'the pet is their support network' so if they are offered accommodation that does not allow them, it may not be a viable route away from homelessness **(Burnley, Charity)**.

Frontline workers described the harm that can be caused to clients by longer waits for supported accommodation and longer stays in accommodation that may be unsuitable or inappropriate.

People vulnerable to exploitation may be placed in HMOs without appropriate support. People may also be placed in out-of-area accommodation, far from their support networks. All these factors can have a serious impact on mental health.

'There is not enough supported accommodation projects so there are people with complex needs that are continuing negative cycles because the in-depth support is not available. Putting someone with complex needs into an HMO [House in Multiple Occupation] with no support is going to result in them returning to homelessness which is what we want to prevent.'

Nottingham, Charity

'...when allocating temporary accommodation through the NIHE [Northern Ireland Housing Executive], people are often placed in different towns due to the shortage of suitable housing. This results in individuals being housed far from their existing support networks, which creates additional challenges and can negatively impact their wellbeing and stability.'

Derry City and Strabane, Charity

1.2 Affordability

The right type of accommodation can exist in the right place but still be out of reach because it is unaffordable over the long term.

Up-front costs such as deposits and rent in advance were a significant barrier: **60%** of respondents said these were difficult or very difficult to access. However, respondents also described local and national grant schemes that could often overcome these one-off costs. In some areas, frontline workers said this was working well.

'The council is very helpful, and do help with loans for deposits, also support with discretionary payments to prevent homelessness and for furnishing and white goods.'

Bath and North East Somerset, Charity

The harder problem to overcome was ongoing affordability because of the increasing gap between income and rent. For those supported by housing benefit this was made very difficult by Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates not covering rents in most regions.

This year, **86%** of respondents said that it was difficult or very difficult to find accommodation within the LHA rate.

A large number of comments mentioned that the LHA rate was too low to cover rents in their area, meaning there were very few options for private rented sector accommodation for people relying on benefits.

Frontline workers have reported in our survey for years that the level of LHA is a significant barrier, preventing people from moving into settled homes and forcing longer stays in temporary accommodation. As rents have continued to increase while the LHA has been frozen, this problem has worsened.

'Across the sector, it has become more difficult to assist any group into alternative accommodation. High rents versus an unrealistic UC rent (Local Housing Allowance) rate is resulting in an increasingly large gap between asking rents and affordability.'

Highlands, Local Government



'Mortgage rates have gone up, the pressures on private landlords have increased and so the cost of rents have increased but the LHA rates have been frozen again.'

Sheffield, Charity

Young, single people face particular challenges with affordability, as they can generally only access the shared accommodation rate of LHA. Also, where accommodation is available within the LHA rate, frontline workers report it is often poor quality.

'The housing market for Private rent tenants is becoming massively unobtainable, with no management of the buildings and the standards we are seeing aren't great. For those under 35 no private rent landlord will accept them due to them not being able to claim the higher rate of LHA.'

Manchester, Charity

Frontline workers reported that some individuals needed to use their disability benefits to top up their rent payments.



'Clients are having to foot the bill, using sickness and disability payments, intended for their conditions – to fund the short comings of the councils, and the unfair LHA.'

Newport (Casnewydd), Charity

LHA rates are frozen at levels out of step with rents in many areas of the UK, during a time of increased competition for a limited supply of housing. When the only available housing is unaffordable, people are locked into high-cost temporary accommodation.

1.3 Additional barriers to accessing local authority homelessness and prevention support

Suitable accommodation can be available and affordable but still out of reach of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Local authorities are already bound by homelessness legislation when making decisions about housing support. For example, in some nations this includes deciding if someone has a priority need.

However, with housing scarcely available, some frontline workers in the voluntary sector describe existing rules being applied more restrictively. These include higher thresholds, strict documentation requirements, and restrictive processes. Some disagreed with decisions about eligibility, whilst others felt processes were unnecessary or applied incorrectly, stopping people from getting the support they were entitled to.

'The Local Housing Authority decides that too many vulnerable 18 – 24 year olds are not in 'priority need'. They are the only service that can provide immediate access to accommodation for young people apart from Children's services for homeless 16 & 17 year olds.'

Plymouth, Charity

Frontline workers also reported problems accessing accommodation provided by the local authority because of local connection rules. They felt that the rules seemed to be becoming stricter and, in some cases, were not being appropriately applied.

'More stringent application of restrictive Local Connection rules prevents... homeless people from being given a service at their point of need.'

Kensington and Chelsea, Charity

Frontline workers suggest that despite the legal exemption from local connection tests for social housing for people fleeing domestic abuse, this group is still sometimes excluded from social housing for this reason.

'Due to shortages of social housing, local authorities are acting on the borders of the law (local connection tests being used to gatekeep housing from victims of domestic

abuse where local connection does not apply)’

Chelmsford, Charity

As well as restrictive criteria and decisions, respondents also gave examples of access barriers affecting people they support. For example, services which only take referrals over the phone. These can leave people having to ‘jump through hoops’ to access support for which they may be eligible **(Camden, Charity)**.

There was evidence of access barriers affecting various groups including people with disabilities, people facing digital exclusion or language and communication barriers, people with additional or complex needs and high-risk victims of domestic abuse.

‘Digital exclusion poses a frequent barrier... two of my current clients, who are both in their 80s, don’t even have mobile phones and are reliant on a landline. Though some digital services are getting better at providing translation/interpreter services, I often find that ESOL speakers struggle to access support from organisations that do not provide face-to-face services, including ...our local authority ... have an office but will only allow people to go there and receive face to face help in the most extreme circumstances, it took me multiple complaints to get a deaf client in to see them after they kept telling him to use the phone.’

Eastbourne, Charity



‘A lot of my role is trying to get past brick walls, gatekeeping or barriers that seem immovable.’

**Southend-on-Sea, Housing Association/
Registered Social Landlord**

At the same time, frontline workers in local authorities expressed frustration at the lack of housing resources, which severely limited their ability to support people and fulfil the duties owed to those who presented as homeless.

‘I have given bad news to clients all the time and explained the desperate situation for housing in Edinburgh, and basically,

there is nothing I can offer, I am unable to prevent, and more people are presenting as homeless as is their right.’

Edinburgh, Local Government

‘We are now using hotels to accommodate people when previously we have never had to, we no longer are able to provide accommodation to non-priority people.’

Stockport, Local Government



‘There has been no improvements in terms of prevention due to housing emergency. Unless local authorities start being funded properly these services will continue to be more challenging for frontline services & staff to deliver.’

West Dunbartonshire, Local Government

1.4 Additional barriers to accessing private rented accommodation

Respondents mentioned specific access barriers to the private rented sector even when accommodation was available and technically affordable. Many said their clients were at a disadvantage compared to other prospective tenants.

Fewer than **2%** reported that it was easy to find private landlords who would accept tenants receiving housing benefits.

‘Private landlords are able to cherry pick more suitable applicants and make higher demands on criteria such as, being in employment, high deposits etc. This presents a huge barrier to people who access benefits for some/all income and those who have no recourse to savings or lump sums to secure a home with a deposit.’

Rochdale, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Young single people without long tenant histories had even more limited options.

‘They do not even get viewings on properties being advertised once income is disclosed... Most private rents expect a reference and tenant history which is extremely difficult when you are 18 with no renting history.’

Wyre Forest, Charity

90% of respondents said that it was difficult or very difficult to obtain a guarantor to secure accommodation. Almost all comments made about obtaining a guarantor described it as a barrier that was very hard, if not impossible for their clients to overcome. Some felt that this was the biggest barrier to accessing the private rented sector.

‘Most landlords will not accept benefit claimants with no guarantor.’

Brighton and Hove, Charity



‘There are a lot of private renting landlords who will consider and then reject young people applying for housing who receive benefits because they have other applicants with income that is more secure, or a guarantor, or who can pay rent up front.’

Bristol, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

1.5 Blocked move-on and system gridlock

When people are ready to leave emergency or supported accommodation but cannot access settled housing, they may be unable to live as independently as they would wish.

This reduces the accommodation available to others and creates bottlenecks across the homelessness system. A shortage of social housing was frequently cited as the real missing element, but barriers to accessing the private rented sector are often the immediate reason people cannot move on.

Frontline workers described people who could manage independent tenancies, but remained in supported accommodation because there were no realistic options.

‘Many of the clients we work with would be able to successfully manage private rented tenancies if more landlords would accept UC or if the shared rate was more representative of housing costs... supported accommodation is being used by people who may not really require the intended

levels of support but ultimately have little other option.’

Southwark, Charity

This leaves people who need supported accommodation waiting.

‘People on benefits (which is the majority of people I work with) are already being marginalised and priced out of private let accommodation. Supported accommodation providers have long waiting lists and in the meantime, vulnerable clients are sent to emergency accommodation where they are often at risk of readmission to hospital.’

Leeds, Charity

This lack of flow through the system is affecting access to temporary accommodation. It is leaving some people stuck for years in what is meant to be a temporary placement, whilst leaving fewer spaces for others who need it.

69% of respondents said that temporary accommodation was ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to obtain.

There were many comments about temporary accommodation, mainly referring to accessing it or being unable to move on from it.



‘The circumstances remain the same, there is not enough social housing to provide move on’s, that takes up all the available temp accommodation.’

Cardiff (Caerdydd), Charity

Temporary accommodation itself may also be unsuitable, because of poor conditions or a lack of basic facilities. This is problematic for any length of stay but becomes more serious if temporary accommodation is used for much longer than planned because of a lack of move-on options.



'A lot of the TA placements available do not come with kitchen appliances, or include shared bathrooms – with the nearest bathroom down two flights of stairs...'

Cardiff (Caerdydd), Local Government

When suitable temporary accommodation was unavailable, frontline workers described councils relying on hotels or B&Bs. This can meet an immediate need, but expensive hotels use resources that could be spent elsewhere, whilst not resolving the lack of move-on accommodation.

'Temporary accommodation is straight forward as we book B&B's or Hotels but this is a very expensive and short term solution. Finding longer term solutions is where it gets very difficult.'

Southampton, Local Government

There will always be a need for temporary accommodation, but frontline workers describe a lack of movement causing gridlock across the system. This is impacting access to all types of accommodation including emergency provision, and the underlying shortage of housing that is suitable, affordable and accessible, is not being resolved.

1.6 Appropriate support alongside housing

Supporting people to move out of homelessness and reduce the future risk of a return to homelessness often requires the combined work of many services to address debt, legal problems, substance use, and mental and physical illnesses. Many of these issues can be exacerbated by periods of homelessness and housing inequality.

Specialist support can be essential to enable people to move on and rebuild their lives. Specialist support here refers to roles that cannot be fulfilled by a frontline homelessness worker, such as providing medical treatment or legal representation. Frontline workers report long waiting lists for specialist services, alongside decreased funding, and service closures. Access to mental health services was a frequently

cited concern, with many comments about this issue. These were mainly about how difficult these services are to access.

'A lot of homelessness is caused by other underlying issues, whether that is with employment, mental health, health, substance misuse, relationships etc. There is less and less support available in these areas and the amount of people struggling with these things seems to be ever increasing.'

Southend-on-Sea, Criminal Justice System

71% of respondents reported that it is difficult to access mental health care,

with **72%** reporting that it is difficult to access support for co-occurring conditions (such as substance use and mental health issues).

'It is very difficult to get a dual diagnosis and support for combined is impossible in our area. The clients are always advised to address their addictions before they will be considered for mental health support. We struggle to liaise with probation services even when we have direct contact details for their worker, they often do not respond to us after any contact.'

South Tyneside, Charity

Frontline workers also report that it is difficult to access specialist healthcare (**55%** of respondents), immigration advice/support (**58%**) and legal advice for their clients (**52%**).

Frontline homelessness workers are left to manage complex issues without necessary support, taking on more risk while they mediate between clients with urgent support needs and overwhelmed services.

'Agencies and providers such as NHS Teams, Adult Social Care, Mental Health Teams, etc. have seen massive cuts to their service while demand continues to increase... This causes a delay in sourcing appropriate housing options and can cause risks to increase while people wait to be seen.'

Southampton, Local Government

Long waiting times also have knock-on effects for clients whose situation and health may deteriorate further in the meantime. This can result in higher levels of support being needed down the line as people reach points of crisis or withdraw from frontline homelessness services while waiting for specialist support.



'I regularly see clients presenting with very poor mental health and expressing suicidal thoughts, yet they are unable to access consistent support because they do not meet service criteria. In these situations, I often have to spend significant time advocating and pushing for access to support, particularly after a crisis has passed... Without appropriate support, the risk of housing breakdown increases significantly.'

Bedford, Charity

Frontline workers describe the dehumanising effects on their clients of being bounced around different services with no clear route to support. Respondents describe the pressure placed on certain vulnerable groups who sometimes need to 'prove that they are worthy of treatment.' (**West Suffolk, Charity**). Managing restrictive bureaucratic pathways to accessing support not only places pressure on clients but also requires significant time and effort on the part of frontline workers.

'To access any services, people need to provide paperwork of some description and jump through a number of bureaucratic hoops. Add in learning difficulties, social exclusion, cultural barriers, language barriers, 80% of my work as a welfare benefit link worker is effectively triaging and referring cases to other services, ensuring that crisis points are properly articulated to allow the service to take on the case.'

Bristol, Local Government

1.7 Preventing a future crisis

Prevention is now a central part of homelessness policy across all four nations following recent legislative changes and new strategies.

This makes it important to understand the impact of this focus on the frontline and whether workers feel better able to prevent homelessness in practice.

In our survey, homelessness prevention was defined very broadly by respondents – it was not just about preventing first-time homelessness. Examples included reducing the chance of repeat rough sleeping, reducing the risk of tenancy breakdown, reducing risk for people in particular circumstances or supporting someone into more secure accommodation. Some people described specialist prevention services or roles, but more often these were frontline workers in a broad range of roles working to reduce a client's future risk of a housing crisis.

The survey asked frontline workers whether there were specific ways their ability to prevent homelessness had improved or deteriorated over the past two years for young people, private renters, single people with and without complex support needs, refugees, and people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). For every group, more frontline workers identified ways their ability had deteriorated than ways it had improved, and at least half reported no improvement. It seems to have been particularly difficult to prevent homelessness for private renters and single people with complex support needs, with around half reporting that their ability to do so had deteriorated.

Frontline workers repeatedly identified the lack of affordable housing as the biggest barrier to prevention. The lack of affordable housing and restrictions on support available to people in particular circumstances limit preventative options and the effectiveness of available preventative measures. Even among respondents who explicitly described improvements in preventative practice, nearly half also said their ability to access suitable accommodation had decreased.

'The services we have to support these people are stretched. The supported housing schemes that are left now have long waiting lists as do mental health services, so help is often arriving too late to prevent homelessness.'

St Albans, Local Government

At the same time, some respondents described developments in preventative practice – interventions or ways of working specifically designed to reduce the future risk of homelessness. For example: earlier identification of risk; intervening earlier to support people; more targeted pathways matched to individual needs; more proactive tenancy sustainment; better coordination between services; and frontline workers developing specialist knowledge to support people in particular circumstances. Frontline workers described measures to improve working practices and systems, including using trauma-informed practice; partnership working with other organisations; and providing family mediation and support for young people at risk of homelessness.



'Not enough services to support the complex needs, and people get removed from services for not engaging in a way that suits the service – no recognition for individual needs and a person centred approach.'

Worcester, Charity

'While growth has been seen in the mental health areas of our preventative work, it's still incredibly challenging with the economic climate.'

Dartford, Charity

In some areas, respondents felt there had been a move away from prevention. One Edinburgh charity worker said there had been 'significant disinvestment from preventative services', instead prioritising people already in crisis.

Additional barriers make it even worse for people in particular circumstances. People with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) have far fewer options due to their lack of entitlement to housing and other support. Many younger single people also have fewer options, as they are only eligible for the Shared Accommodation Rate of LHA. It can also be difficult to find housing and other support for people who need specialist support alongside supported accommodation, which is increasingly hard to find.

'Our service has placed greater emphasis on early identification of risk... This has enabled us to intervene sooner.'

Hackney, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

'For single people with complex support needs, our ability to prevent homelessness has improved through more structured, trauma-informed, psychologically informed support that focuses on tenancy sustainment.'

Vale of Glamorgan (Bro Morgannwg), Housing Association / Registered Social Landlord

In summary, better preventative practice can help frontline workers identify future risks earlier and provide appropriate support, but it cannot overcome the lack of suitable housing and specialist support which are often needed to prevent homelessness.

IN DEPTH: Options for people who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

The challenges of supporting people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) were highlighted by many survey respondents. We have looked at this in more detail because restrictions on access to public funds can leave frontline workers with very few of the usual options for preventing or resolving homelessness.

When people who have NRPF become homeless or experience destitution, there are fewer routes available for frontline workers to support them into stable accommodation. If their immigration status is not clear or they are struggling to evidence it, it is even harder to know what they are entitled to. Timely access to specialist immigration advice can be crucial in these cases. But where someone is not entitled to public funds, frontline workers may still have very few housing options available, and that includes vulnerable people at risk. Many respondents also reported increasing numbers of people presenting in these circumstances.

'I have supported clients who cannot access housing or essential support because their visa does not allow them to claim public funds. For those with NRPF status, this creates a serious barrier to safety, including women and children fleeing domestic abuse who cannot be rehoused. Some are becoming homeless because they cannot access the Domestic Abuse Housing Fund (DDVC).'

Bedford, Charity

41% said their ability to prevent homelessness for those with NRPF status was deteriorating, whilst many respondents commented that demand among this group had increased. **58%** said access to support for immigration issues was difficult.

'As there are no suitable move-on options available for refugees/NRPF they are stuck in a cycle of rough-sleeping and temporary respite.'

Luton, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Where communication, documentation or navigating services are the immediate barriers, frontline workers describe being able to help. For example, by identifying the support needed, signposting and 'advocating for and accompanying people to appointments/interactions' so they can get the help they are entitled to (**Newcastle upon Tyne, Charity**).

However, they cannot provide immigration advice or overcome lack of access to public funds for housing.

'I have worked with one individual with no access to public funds while his immigration status was fixed. In this instance his solicitor fixed this and we supported him with food shops and spoke with utilities and the Council re rent arrears for a while until then.'

Bristol, Charity

The increased risk of homelessness and lack of ordinary routes out of homelessness for this group have been described by frontline workers as an 'impossible' situation and highly frustrating.

'Working with people at high risk of homelessness, especially those with no recourse to public funds, can feel frustrating and disheartening when there are limited options available.'

Glasgow, Charity

Whatever the rules around access to public funds, if there are no realistic routes to support someone who becomes homeless, frontline workers have few options to help them regain stable accommodation. Without that, people will find it much harder to recover from a crisis and, where possible, return to supporting themselves. This is particularly important when governments have set targets to reduce or end rough sleeping. These plans need to include realistic routes for people whose immigration status restricts access to public funds and housing support.

1.8 Future outlook

Frontline workers were pessimistic overall about the outlook for the homelessness sector.

Just over three quarters (**76%**) of frontline workers thought that the homelessness situation was going to get slightly or a lot worse in the next few years.

Only one in ten (10%) thought it would get slightly or much better, and **14%** thought it would stay the same.

As well as the issues in the housing and homelessness system, some pointed to wider political and economic pressures when giving reasons for their response. These included global conflicts, the climate crisis, population growth, migration and lack of employment opportunities:



'People cannot afford the cost of living and things will become more difficult with climate breakdown and wars which affect oil and gas prices. The UK does not seem to be very resilient and the average person will suffer because of this. I am concerned that wealth inequality will grow and many people will live in poverty.'

Manchester, Charity

'There seems to be less employment with more industries and retail closing. Increase in number of older generation males/females losing homes and younger guests struggling to find work opportunities that would pay a rent.'

Gravesham, Charity

A small number of frontline workers said media stories and reports on public opinion relating to immigration had direct impacts on their work. One felt these had led to 'additional challenges in working with Refugees' and had 'reduced options for this group' (**Tameside, Local Government**).

Frontline workers expressed mixed views about whether local and national government policies would make the homelessness situation better or worse in the next few years. Some expressed

frustration at how lack of funding, at both national and local level, had impacted on their ability to support clients. There were many comments about cuts to organisational funding, including reduced statutory funding.

'Major cuts in funding from central government to local councils which is causing a knock on effect on independent services.'

Exeter, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Some felt that their government was not doing enough to tackle the housing crisis. This included government policies and funding for housing and homelessness, and related areas such as mental health and substance use support.



'My concern is that if the Government does not take homelessness and housing more seriously then more people will be at serious risk, including families... We need more affordable, sustainable housing.'

Buckinghamshire, Charity

'I don't feel homelessness is a priority to government as it isn't a topic which gets votes.'

Causeway Coast and Glens, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

'The government's inability to provide adequate MH support for its population is woeful and threatens the stability of the whole economy.'

Eastbourne, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Frontline workers called for a number of measures from national government to improve the homelessness situation, including increasing the LHA rate, building more social housing and increasing the length of time people granted refugee status were allowed to stay in Home Office accommodation.

Several respondents commented on the positive difference made by the temporary extension to the move-on period from asylum accommodation for newly granted refugees from 28 to 56 days.

This survey opened just at the point this was changed again to 42 days, giving limited time to judge the impact of this change. The multiple changes made some comments difficult to interpret, but at least one was explicit that 42 days was insufficient and that a return to 56 days would make a real difference to prevention.

'Refugees' move-on period has changed frequently over the past few years, with the reduction to 42 days making no material improvement for our clients. A permanent return to a 56-day move-on period would be the single most valuable change to prevent continued homelessness amongst newly-granted refugees.'

Cardiff (Caerdydd), Charity

Some respondents expressed at least some optimism about their government's housing plans, including legislation such as the Renters' Rights Act and plans to build more affordable housing.

'Positive government steps [are] being taken on housing and homelessness issues in particular, and the cost-of-living crisis in general. The government seems to be trying, brick by brick, to rebuild the 'social safety net' ...'

Warwick, Charity

However, they also pointed to the scale and complexity of the task of fixing the housing crisis and the length of time this would take:

'I feel the government needs to take these issues more seriously coming from a position of compassion, human obligation and educated understanding rather than any quick fix to make the figures look right... More effort needs also to be put into prevention which in the long run is cost effective anyway.'

Sheffield, Community Organisation

In summary, some respondents felt policy was moving in a positive direction while the vast majority still expect homelessness to worsen in the next few years. Their reasons pointed to the scale of the problem and the amount of time it would take before planned changes would have a real impact on people experiencing homelessness.



IN DEPTH: Renters' Rights Act

The survey closed as the Renters' Rights Act was coming into force in England. Despite respondents not being specifically asked about it, there were 108 related comments, making it a notable unprompted theme.

As with other new and existing legislation, frontline workers may need to exercise judgement about how the rules apply in practice, whether landlord requirements are reasonable or potentially discriminatory, whether a decision can be challenged and what action is most likely to help someone secure accommodation. Views about the likely impact were mixed.

In the previous weeks and months, some had seen an increase in landlords issuing Section 21 notices and felt that demand for their service had increased as a result. There were also concerns that in the long term, it could lead to fewer properties being available in the private rented sector, and hence more competition.

'With the introduction of the renter's rights act, many private landlords have done Section 21s on their tenants ...resulting in an influx of people seeking private rented housing options and a greater demand for our service from young people at risk of homelessness.'

Bristol, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

'The Renters Rights Act may provide some protection to existing tenants from homelessness, but the initial impact is showing that landlords are selling up or leaving the market, so there may be less rented properties available which could lead to more competition for properties and rental increases.'

Hyndburn, Community Organisation

Some were hopeful that once the Act came into force, tenants would have more protection and no-fault evictions would reduce.

'The Renters' Rights Act will have a big, mostly positive, impact on people in PRS – which in the absence of social housing is the main route out of homelessness now.'

Newcastle upon Tyne, Charity

Others expected that access to the private rented sector could become harder or that it would put pressure on homelessness services.

'More difficult to form referral partnerships with housing associations and landlords because they have concerns about the impact of the Renter's Rights Act.'

Croydon, Charity

Some felt that while the Act was a good thing, other important measures needed to be taken in conjunction with the new legislation to alleviate the homelessness situation, such as building more social homes and increasing the LHA rate.



'While this government is doing some positive things (renters rights etc.), we need massive investment in social housing building and housing benefits to cover local housing rates...'

Newcastle upon Tyne, Charity

There were no comments which mentioned both the Renters' Rights Act and discrimination, despite the Act including new protections against discrimination and the earlier evidence that this is a significant barrier for clients accessing the private rented sector.

Most comments were about security against eviction, clearer rights for existing tenants and concern about decreased housing stock in the PRS following the Act. Across the survey, respondents frequently mentioned unrealistic affordability assessments in the private rental sector and resulting requirements for guarantors for those on benefits as major barriers. There was little indication from the survey that frontline workers expected the new protections against benefit discrimination to remove these barriers for people relying on benefit income to cover housing costs.

1.9 Adapting frontline services and practice

Despite severe constraints on housing and support, frontline workers described how they and their organisations were finding ways to improve situations for their clients.

Much of this involved more joined-up services, building relationships between professionals across sectors and bringing different services together in one place. There were many comments about the benefits of partnership working. Some organisations employed specialist workers to coordinate support for some clients, such as those with complex needs. Frontline workers also described using their knowledge of local services and relationships with other professionals to navigate complex referral pathways:

‘We attempt to act as the client’s point of contact for many services involved in their complex cases. We encourage and facilitate collaborative work between all legal and support services involved.’

Glasgow, Local Government

‘We have two staff members assigned to caseworking our most complex cases – working collaboratively with social care, probation, mental health and housing to ensure no one slips through the cracks ...’

Rotherham, Charity

There were also comments from respondents in both voluntary sector organisations and local authorities who were trying to build stronger voluntary-statutory relationships:

‘My service is already part of an Alliance of 7 partners delivering services to people experiencing multiple disadvantage. The Alliance is funded by the Council.’

Plymouth, Charity

Frontline workers gave examples of partner organisations working together to provide outreach services in day centres, local libraries and schools. Multi-agency hubs, providing people with support for a range of needs, including financial and medical needs, as well as housing support, were also highlighted.

‘We have strengthened our partnership working, particularly by delivering services

alongside the council within local libraries. This has helped us remain accessible to the community and reach individuals earlier, before their situations escalate.’

Hounslow, Charity

‘In my role the continued development of the Lived Experience Collective, which provides the breakfast project which has become a one stop shop for agencies to come into, providing drug, alcohol, mental health, housing, social services, finance, Russian speaking interpreter, GP, TB nurses, hairdresser.’

Great Yarmouth, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Some respondents also reported that their organisations were being proactive in trying to increase housing provision in their area. Respondents from charities, housing associations and local government mentioned schemes in their area to help people access the private rented sector by working with landlords.

‘We have now access to a Private Rented scheme for people to access properties for landlords that we are working with.’

Kirklees, Local Government

Organisations were seeking funding and setting up their own projects to provide accommodation for their client groups, including women, people with complex needs, refugees and asylum seekers. These projects included supported lodgings schemes and the building or refurbishment of existing properties to provide accommodation:

‘Our organisation has opened a women’s shelter within the past 2 years which has made things slightly easier to refer females for emergency accommodation.’

Belfast, Charity

These examples show that local practice changes can make a difference. Strong relationships between services can make them easier to navigate, specialist workers can coordinate complex cases, and hub-based services can help people access support earlier. In some areas, local organisations have also created additional accommodation themselves. However, most of these responses make better use of the housing and support that is available. They cannot overcome wider shortages of suitable housing or specialist support.

Summary

Frontline workers stressed that supporting clients to navigate the housing and homelessness system continues to be very challenging.

They described a gridlocked system, where people experiencing homelessness struggle to access accommodation, from temporary through to more long-term housing. There is a severe shortage of both social housing and affordable private rented housing, which in turn prevents people from moving on from temporary accommodation.

Accessing the private rented sector is particularly hard, with frozen LHA rates leaving private rents unaffordable for many clients. Social housing is also difficult to access, with long waiting lists and, in some areas, reports of restrictive decisions and access processes. Some groups face particular challenges accessing accommodation, such as those with NRPF, due to a lack of entitlement to housing or other support.

Other support services, such as mental health and substance use services, are also hard to access, with long waiting lists which can have a negative impact on people's housing situations. Frontline workers often have to maintain a sense of stability in people's lives while they wait for the services they need.

Frontline workers build considerable expertise in navigating services, supporting people through complex situations and finding ways around barriers. Survey respondents gave many examples of how they were working to prevent homelessness.

These included identifying people at risk of homelessness at an early stage, intervening to provide support and working in partnership with other services to provide holistic support. But there are limits to what preventative practice can achieve on its own.

A lack of suitable and affordable housing remains a barrier that frontline workers cannot overcome. Long waits in unsuitable accommodation can undermine the health and stability of clients and the concerted efforts of frontline workers, sometimes resulting in higher support needs further down the line.

When there is nowhere suitable for people to move to, they remain stuck, regardless of how well frontline staff understand what needs to happen next.

Recommendations: access to accommodation and other support

To improve the availability and affordability of appropriate accommodation...

1. National and local governments across the UK should increase the supply of settled self-contained accommodation at scale and as much as possible at social rent. Housing associations, funders and charities should work together to develop, fund or secure accommodation that reflects local need and the needs and circumstances of individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

2. The DWP should act quickly to unfreeze Local Housing Allowance (LHA), ideally restoring rates to the 30th percentile of local rents and maintaining them at this level, so that people receiving LHA can access and sustain private rented accommodation.

3. Governments should provide more guidance around fair assessment of affordability and the proportionate use of guarantors. This would help to enable those receiving income from benefits to be considered on equal terms with other prospective tenants.

To improve the provision and accessibility of specialist and support services...

4. Local and national services should remove unnecessary administrative and eligibility barriers to accessing housing and other support. Services should take account of the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness and be flexible in enabling them to access support in a way that is possible for them. This might include flexibility over requirements for ID and other documentation, or whether the client accesses the service in person, by phone or online.

To ensure all those who are experiencing or are facing homelessness get support...

5. Governments across the UK should create realistic options for people with NRPF or who are destitute or homeless. This should include access to emergency accommodation and enough support to give people stability to resolve their situation, so that, where possible, they can move towards self-sufficiency.

6. National and local authorities should increase access to timely, publicly funded specialist legal advice and representation where legal issues put people at risk of homelessness or prevent them accessing the housing and support to which they are entitled.





Section 2 – Workforce



'I feel that frontline workers in homeless services are seriously undervalued, under appreciated and under paid for the expertise, experience and empathy that they bring to the role. Our jobs are becoming increasingly difficult, we are under pressure, this will continue in a downward spiral until there are major changes.'

Frontline worker, Belfast, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord



Section 2 –

Workforce

Frontline work depends on skills, knowledge and judgement. Frontline workers described building trusting relationships with clients and using their expertise to help them navigate increasingly complex housing and support systems. As new challenges in their roles emerged, they said there was a constant need to stay on top of legislation, referral routes and available options.

The conditions they are working in remain very challenging, with many experiencing higher demands for their services, limited resources and housing options, low pay and a lack of support or recognition of their skilled work. Just over half said the job had a negative impact on their own wellbeing. At their worst, these conditions can mean repeatedly knowing what someone needs but not having the resources to act, which can lead to moral injury and burnout, limiting the capacity of frontline workers to use their expertise effectively.

Supportive teams, reflective practice and supervision can help. Many frontline workers said they felt passionate about and highly committed to their work. But fair pay, appropriate role boundaries, opportunities to develop and the ability to use their expertise effectively also matter.



2.1 Working conditions, support and recognition

Frontline workers described being listened to, having some control over their work, realistic caseloads, training, safety, flexibility, leave and pay as indications of how much they felt valued and respected in their roles by their employer.

While workplace wellbeing and ideal working conditions look different for everyone, certain themes emerged from the survey. These suggested that despite the strain of high workloads and an emotionally demanding job, organisations can and should take steps to improve working conditions for frontline workers.

Reflective practice emerged in the responses as an essential form of support in the workplace for many frontline workers, allowing workers to share expertise and learn from challenging situations.

‘The amount of stress that we are under due to high needs clients impacts our wellbeing. Having a monthly staff reflective practice supports us dealing with stress and gain strategies to support clients’ issues and minimise the levels of staff stress’

Newham, Charity

Most frontline workers also felt that support was particularly strong from their immediate team. **88%** felt supported by colleagues and **79%** by their manager.

Frontline workers also said working as a team helped them to share experiences, discuss decisions and improve their work. Building in and ensuring time for proper handovers, debriefs and guidance at work allowed frontline workers to better manage high workloads and the emotional pressures of the job.

‘I generally find my caseload manageable and I’m able to work effectively because the team shares information well, supports each other on shift, and we use clear handovers and documentation to keep work consistent. I have been able to maintain a boundary between work and home by using clear shift

handovers, completing notes promptly, and debriefing when needed so I don't carry unresolved stress outside work.'

Vale of Glamorgan (Bro Morgannwg), Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Many respondents said that they felt trusted and valued by other professionals. However, some respondents contrasted supportive colleagues or managers with senior leaders or a wider organisation that did not understand the complexity and skill set of their work.

'My line manager and colleagues are great but none of us feel valued by anyone higher up.'

Gravesham, Charity

Some frontline workers mentioned that they felt their role and the breadth and depth of their knowledge were not always recognised, either within their organisation or by other organisations they work alongside. While this was not always the case, it suggests the need for greater recognition of frontline homelessness work and workers.

'Other professions look down upon the role of 'Support Worker', wrongly assuming lack of experience or education of staff.'

Bromsgrove, Charity

Broadly, frontline workers reported a strong professional identity and pride in their work, with **84%** reporting that they felt proud telling people what they do and **93%** saying they felt they make a difference.

This work, however, is often highly demanding and emotionally draining. Frontline workers value recognition of their efforts and adequate workplace support as important ways of enabling them to work effectively in the long term.



'When I have a supportive workplace... I feel strong and happy. This support means I do not just survive in my job; I do very well. Because, I am cared for, I can give my absolute best to my residents every single day...and look forward to making a positive difference for many years to come.'

Tower Hamlets, Charity

2.2 Pay, living costs and the value of frontline work

Frontline concerns around pay cover both whether they have financial security and whether the work they do is properly valued.

Among responses that could be clearly grouped, respondents could be divided into four groups:

	Pay felt fair for the work	Pay felt unfair for the work
Enough to cover housing and living costs	35%	14%
Not enough to cover housing and living costs	4%	47%

The largest group, **47%**, felt their pay was neither fair for the work involved nor enough to cover their housing and living costs.

Overall, the responses suggest that concerns about pay relate both to financial security and to whether workers feel their expertise and responsibilities are properly recognised.

Some people said they could earn more in the private sector for a role with less responsibility. While it is challenging to compare frontline work with the breadth of the private sector, these comments expressed the 'demoralising' experience of feeling responsibility for the 'lives, safety, wellbeing, and mental health' of clients (**Wyre Forest, Local Government**), while simultaneously feeling devalued by the pay offered for this work.

Notably, there were also a number of comments saying pay was not comparable with similar roles in other organisations and sectors, particularly when comparing voluntary sector roles with equivalents in local authorities.

'Our peers in the council who have exactly the same roles and responsibilities as us are paid at a much higher grade than us in the voluntary sector.'

Cardiff (Caerdydd), Charity

Whether a salary is enough to live on often depends on somebody's circumstances. Some respondents mentioned being young and single as factors that made it harder to live on a frontline worker's salary. Single parents similarly reported that low pay was a significant source of stress, with some reporting that they required Universal Credit even when working full time.

'Single parent working full time with no additional physical or financial support, receiving UC top up on wages and financially crippled by cost of childcare particularly during school holidays.'

Portsmouth, Local Government

A number of respondents described managing because they had a partner with a higher income, had paid off their mortgage or received a pension.

'without financial input from my partner I would struggle to manage on my own.'

County Durham, Charity

Other frontline workers said they could cover ordinary costs but had little left to save or deal with unexpected expenses. Work expenses become more significant when staff have less financial security. Some respondents talked about mileage rates not covering the cost of driving, particularly those working in roles involving regular travel. One respondent said they were 'not fully reimbursed for work related travel so I am out of pocket every month' (**Westminster, Charity**).

For some frontline workers, pay is about more than whether they can afford to live. It is also an indication of whether their level of responsibility is recognised and valued. Respondents linked their concerns about pay to various responsibilities and working conditions: for example, managing complex cases, safeguarding, high levels of risk, violence and exposure to trauma.

'The level of expertise and responsibility I have and am required to have in my role is not reflected in my salary.'

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Charity

Some respondents said that pay was not the main reason they did the work. One said: 'I am not money oriented. Job satisfaction comes before pay scales' (**Hyndburn, Community Organisation**), while another said they would 'much rather have a job I love and care about than something high paid that I get no value from' (**Edinburgh, Charity**).

This does not mean that pay is unimportant. In one case, a respondent who had taken a pay cut to work in a homelessness charity role said:



'I am told by my manager that this is the cost of making a difference. I struggle financially and often utilise credit cards to purchase necessities.'

Rotherham, Charity

Having a strong commitment to the cause may mean people accept lower pay, even when they think that for their level of responsibility and expertise they should be paid more.

Low pay is therefore important for two reasons: firstly, because of the immediate financial impact on workers and, secondly, because of what it communicates about how their work is valued. The fact that many frontline workers find their work meaningful should not make low pay an expected part of working in homelessness, especially as low pay itself may exert further pressure on frontline staff already performing an emotionally taxing role. If comparable roles in similar sectors are better paid, organisations risk losing people who have built up knowledge, relationships and expertise from working in homelessness that are not easy to replace.



'In a demanding frontline role, I cannot efficiently support residents through their crisis if I am secretly worried about paying my own bills. Financial stability will give me the emotional energy and resilience needed to remain fully present in my work.'

Tower Hamlets, Charity

2.3 Training, development and learning through practice

Expertise includes knowing what you need to know, keeping that knowledge current and knowing where your professional boundary is. Most respondents already felt well trained in the fundamental parts of their jobs.

A large majority (**93%**) of survey respondents agreed that they had had the necessary core training, **85%** relational training and **83%** trauma-informed or person-centred training. Confidence was much lower for specialist training, with only **55%** agreeing that they had what they needed.

The qualitative responses suggest that requests for further training are often about maintaining expertise as things change or developing deeper knowledge of a specific area, rather than evidence of a lack of basic knowledge and understanding. Respondents repeatedly mentioned changing housing and welfare rules, immigration, mental health, neurodiversity and increasingly complex circumstances as areas where they need to stay up to date through training to best perform their roles. One worker who felt they had received the necessary training nevertheless said:

‘There is still room for further development, as the sector is continually changing and presenting new challenges.’

Lambeth, Charity

They asked for ongoing refresher training and more specialist input, including changes to housing legislation, advanced housing law, immigration, trauma-informed practice and complex case management.

Workers were also aware of the limits of training. One said: ‘We cannot legally provide immigration advice so a partnership with someone who can would be invaluable.’ (**Manchester, Charity**). Training can help workers recognise an issue, understand when specialist input is needed and navigate towards appropriate support. It cannot replace qualified clinical care, legal representation or regulated advice. There were practical limits to training mostly relating to time and, to a lesser extent, funding. Discussing training needs with managers was easy for **83%**, but **38%** found having time for training difficult, compared

with **31%** who found it difficult to secure funding for training.

‘If I have training booked and there is an emergency with a client – that comes first.’

**North Tyneside, Housing Association/
Registered Social Landlord**

Training may therefore be available without workers having the time to take it up or to apply what they learn.

Formal training is only one way that workers develop their expertise, and over half said they learnt most from doing the work itself after they had started. Just under a quarter of respondents (**24%**) said they were well prepared before starting their current role. By contrast, **65%** said they learned all or most of what they needed on the job and another **10%** said they were still learning key skills. Only **0.6%** said they felt out of their depth or insufficiently prepared, trained or supported. Therefore, professional development does not happen only through formal training; frontline expertise develops more often through doing the work. Workers encounter different situations, see the consequences of decisions, learn local systems, observe more experienced staff and discuss decisions with colleagues during supervision or reflective practice.

Some of that knowledge can then be passed on. One worker with 36 years’ experience across social work and youth work described mentoring students and staff and valued:

‘being able to pass on things I have learnt from others and my own experiences.’

Plymouth, Charity

2.4 Networking and knowledge-sharing

Expertise is often dispersed. No individual worker or service holds all the relevant knowledge on a topic, and that makes networking useful for sharing it.

Workers valued opportunities to exchange expertise, particularly across similar roles and between different places.



'I think sharing knowledge from different regions would [be] hugely beneficial. You can learn from each other, sharing knowledge and resources. This leads to positive adaptations in services and approaches benefiting all services and clients involved.'

Glasgow City, Local Government

Networking was valued because it helped people to know about other services and the people in them. Workers wanted to understand different roles, eligibility, referral processes and available support. Knowing who to contact and how another organisation works gives workers more options when dealing with cases.

But, in a similar way to training, time limits whether workers can do this. One respondent put it simply: 'Time is the issue. Not the availability.' **(West Lindsey, Community Organisation)**

Others questioned whether taking time away from frontline work was worthwhile if networking simply duplicated conversations about things they already gained from their everyday practice.

'I have time and energy to do my work, squeeze in training... but I do not feel it necessary to miss my work routines in the hope of gaining something new from 'networking' outside of daily interactions.'

**Edinburgh, Housing Association/
Registered Social Landlord**

Networking is therefore most valued when it adds something workers can't get from their day-to-day practice or it involves different approaches, such as transferable approaches or useful relationships with other services.

2.5 Wellbeing

Frontline worker wellbeing continues to be a concern, but many respondents expressed a mix of both positive and negative impacts of their work.

51% said that overall, their role had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Frontline workers often described this in terms of what they were unable to do. Many were motivated by helping people and valued the work itself, but found it difficult when the necessary housing, services or resources were not available. This was particularly clear where workers described people remaining in unsafe or unsuitable situations. Some talked about going home knowing somebody would still be sleeping rough or continuing to worry about people they had been unable to help.

'It's very hard to listen to desperate stories day after day without the resources in place to be able to sufficiently help people. I keep needing to let people down who are already in despair.'

Hackney, Health



'It's depressing and frustrating when you cannot find a service that meets the needs of service users. It doesn't feel right helping them move into a service that can't really meet their needs, but it's the best you can find.'

Preston, Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord

Increasing demand, without an increase in funding or resources to match, meant workers repeatedly reported feeling unable to provide the level of support they know is needed.

'I feel more often than in the past that what we have to offer is not enough.'

**Brighton and Hove, Housing Association/
Registered Social Landlord**

Workload was another important factor affecting wellbeing, with **36%** of respondents feeling they do not have enough time to do their jobs. Higher demand together with more challenging cases meant many felt their workload was unmanageable.

78% of respondents who disagreed that their caseload was manageable said their role had a negative impact on their wellbeing. **29%** of respondents felt at risk of burnout often or always, and an additional **49%** sometimes did. Together, high workload, staff constraints and burnout create a vicious cycle where staff end

up needing to take sick leave and others experience additional pressure as a result.

'I love what I do but cannot do my job without being supported by a good management team. I feel burned out as do many of my colleagues. Last year for many months we worked on a skeleton staff because the staff were on sick leave due to stress.'

Braintree, Local Government

Concerns about their own safety and dealing with challenging situations were frequently mentioned as affecting wellbeing. While most respondents (**68%**) agreed that they felt healthy and safe at work, **13%** disagreed.

'My organisation works hard to maintain a wellbeing focus, however high workload and the work sometimes feeling unsafe often feels inevitable.'

**Brighton and Hove, Housing Association/
Registered Social Landlord**

Frontline workers also described the work involved in navigating the housing system and other support services. Where statutory or specialist services were hard to access, workers spent time chasing, advocating and trying to find ways around barriers. This could make the role feel like a continual battle, adding to workload while still not leading to the housing or other outcome needed.

If clinical, legal or other specialist support is unavailable, the burden can also be left with a general frontline support worker.

'Access to statutory support via social care and mental health has decreased. Due to higher access thresholds we've become involved in cases where we have no specific training or understanding.'

Cambridge, Charity

Some respondents described taking on work beyond their remit or feeling expected to provide forms of support that they were not qualified to provide. Limited access to housing and specialist services can therefore increase both the volume and complexity of frontline work.



'I have been in this role for over 10 years and do feel emotionally drained at times. Due to the ever increasing complex needs of our clients, I doubt whether I can provide the relevant support they need, which can lead to a lack of job satisfaction. My role is now less about move on, motivating, raising self esteem etc. and more 'firefighting' incidents.'

Coventry, Charity

Over time, repeatedly being unable to provide the support they know is needed can have a substantial impact on frontline workers' wellbeing, job satisfaction and likelihood of remaining in the sector. Some comments describe the moral distress of knowing what someone needs or what would be the safer or more appropriate option, but not having a realistic way to provide it.

'The role has impacted my wellbeing, not because of the clients or the work itself, but due to systemic challenges.'

Bedford, Charity

The work also had a positive impact on wellbeing. Being able to use knowledge and judgement to achieve something tangible for somebody could reinforce workers' wellbeing and sense of purpose.

'I enjoy supporting clients and assisting where we can to get positive outcomes feels like a real achievement.'

Halton, Local Government

'I get to walk alongside people who are taking brave steps towards a future where they can thrive, which is inspiring and rewarding. I get to be part of a supportive, purpose-driven, fun team of colleagues.'

Croydon, Charity

Supportive teams, supervision and reflective practice can help workers manage the negative impacts of the work, but they cannot always solve the problems that cause them.

2.6 Retention

Overall, most respondents (71%) said they were likely to continue working in homelessness for more than two years, compared with 15% who said they were unlikely to stay and 14% who were uncertain.

Around half gave reasons why. Frontline workers who expected to remain in the sector and commented on their reasons overwhelmingly described positive reasons for doing so. Of the respondents who said they were likely to stay and commented, many said they enjoyed, liked or loved the work. Other reasons for staying included: helping and supporting people; making a difference or achieving positive outcomes; passion, commitment or a strong sense of purpose.

These reasons overlap, but together they show that people are primarily being pulled towards staying by the work itself and what they feel it achieves. This is despite low pay and sometimes challenging employment conditions. For some, this has developed into a strong professional identity. Many referred to having worked in homelessness for a long time or to the expertise, skills or experience they had built. One respondent said:

'I feel I have a lot of specific expertise in routes out of homelessness, it would be a shame for that to be wasted.'

Manchester, Charity

However, even amongst those who intended to stay in the sector, many talked about the challenges in their job and dissatisfaction with conditions. Among those expecting to remain, burnout, stress or emotional impact, complexity, trauma or safety, funding or job insecurity and low pay were all mentioned.

Just because frontline workers indicate an intention to stay, this does not necessarily mean they were positive about their roles. Among the respondents expecting to leave, retirement was the most common reason, mentioned by around a quarter of those who gave a reason.

This is important because not all turnover represents dissatisfaction or something an employer could realistically prevent. It also means recruitment and the transfer of knowledge from experienced to new staff are important to plan for – otherwise with an ageing workforce vital accumulated experience will be lost.

Organisational culture and support, alongside pay, also shaped how our respondents saw their future career path. Burnout, stress or the emotional toll were mentioned by just under a quarter. Respondents also notably mentioned that wider shortages in housing, resources and the availability of other support services shaped how they saw their future in the sector. Some respondents felt unable to continue in their roles because they could not achieve positive outcomes for clients due to structural circumstances beyond their control.



'I enjoy the work and feel I make a difference (sometimes). But financial pressures on my home life meant if something different came along in an alternative sector that paid me more, I would certainly consider it.'

Nottingham, Charity

Respondents who were uncertain about staying gave burnout or stress as their most frequent concern, followed by funding insecurity and pay. Many still described enjoying the work, helping people or wanting to make a difference, but felt undervalued in both pay and professional recognition. If skilled and experienced workers are poorly paid, their judgement is disregarded, or the responsibility of their role is not recognised, retaining them in the role or the sector becomes harder.



'I enjoy the work and feel I make a difference (sometimes). But financial pressures on my home life meant if something different came along in an alternative sector that paid me more, I would certainly consider it.'

Nottingham, Charity

When an experienced worker leaves, an organisation does not lose only a member of staff; it can also lose their knowledge of local systems and particular groups, relationships with other services, experience of difficult situations and ability to support newer colleagues. Expertise within the sector can take time to build and rebuild, and therefore supporting staff retention and the transfer of knowledge are important.

'High turnover in both frontline and management staff adds further strain. It can be tiring to build relationships and understanding within a team, only to have leaders leave and start the process again, which adds additional uncertainty and pressure.'

Blackburn, Community Organisation

As survey responses suggest, it takes time to build networks and expertise that allow frontline workers to best support their clients. Retaining staff who are early in their career is important for maintaining expertise within the sector as highly experienced workers retire. Adequate pay, support and positive working conditions also help ensure new frontline staff can sustain themselves and continue working and building their skills.

The findings suggest a workforce with a strong attachment to the purpose of its work, but for whom commitment does not necessarily make the work sustainable. People often stay because the work matters to them; whether they can keep staying depends much more on the conditions in which they are asked to do it.



Summary

In summary, the survey responses about the workforce show that much of the expertise needed for homelessness work is built through experience.

It is supported by training, reflective practice, strong teams and networks that help staff stay up to date and share practice. Pay affects both whether staff can afford to remain in the sector and whether their skills and responsibility feel properly recognised. When workers can't use their knowledge and judgement, they can become frustrated, contributing to poorer wellbeing and thoughts of leaving. Despite this, workers remain strongly committed to the purpose of their work and proud of their roles but this cannot be taken for granted and is not limitless.

Recommendations: workforce

To ensure there is the skilled and experienced workforce to tackle homelessness...

1. Governments in each of the nations of the UK should ensure funding and commissioning frameworks provide sufficient resources to enable organisations to recruit, retain, develop the skills of and support frontline workers. They should ensure the real costs of frontline support, including fair and appropriate wages are reflected in contract values and, wherever possible, look to fund longer contracts to reduce discontinuity in care, as well as uncertainty and staff turnover when a contract is coming to an end.

2. Funders and commissioners should fund services sufficiently to recognise the expertise and responsibility involved in frontline work, enabling staff to be paid fairly and helping organisations to retain experienced staff.

To enhance, protect and develop the wellbeing and expertise of frontline staff..

3. Organisations should address the conditions that affect wellbeing, including high workloads and caseloads, inadequate support and pressure to work beyond role boundaries. They should also recognise that even once these conditions are dealt with, frontline homelessness work can continue to have a significant negative impact on

wellbeing. Frontline workers need support to deal with challenging cases, emotional demands and situations where they are not able to overcome resource constraints to take action they know is needed. Meaningful support should be made available to help staff manage these pressures.

4. Organisations should give frontline workers the time and opportunities they need to maintain and develop their expertise, including relevant training, learning from colleagues and access to specialist knowledge and advice when dealing with issues beyond their role.

To improve policy and practice for the benefit of workers and those they support...

5. Policymakers should create formal opportunities for frontline workers to contribute their expertise, experience and insight when homelessness policy



Conclusion

Conclusion

Homelessness frontline workers often know in detail what someone needs because of their experience and their proximity to the individual and their situation.

That means they can identify what support is needed, what type of housing is going to be suitable, where it needs to be, what local services need to be involved, what the risks of different options are and what might happen if those risks aren't addressed. They act on that judgement by reducing risks, providing practical and relational support, navigating services, advocating for rights and entitlements, building trusting relationships over time and collaborating with other professionals. All this helps them to achieve better outcomes for individuals.



'I think that "outreach" workers are often overlooked, underestimated and dismissed ... in reality they are the most connected, have vast networks, have more knowledge and insight into a multitude of systems such as benefits, immigration, housing legislation, alcohol and substance misuse – underestimate an outreach worker at your peril!'

Cornwall, Local Government

But some things they can't control. They cannot create suitable or affordable housing where it doesn't exist and they cannot cover for clinical, legal or specialist support that is regulated or outside their professional role. Put simply:

'Housing is beyond our control'
Vale of Glamorgan (Bro Morgannwg),
Housing Association/Registered Social
Landlord

When they can't act on their judgement about what housing and support is needed, this affects both the individual being supported and the frontline worker

themselves. First, it has an immediate impact on the individual, because the housing, support or specialist service they need may not be available. Second, it affects the frontline worker, because they are left feeling frustrated and experiencing 'Stress from having knowledge that should be able to help people, but no public resources are available for that knowledge to work.' Manchester, Charity

Over time, frontline workers repeatedly being unable to act on what they know can have a significant impact on wellbeing, job satisfaction and the likelihood of remaining in the sector. Supportive teams, supervision and reflective practice can help workers manage negative impacts on wellbeing, but they cannot always solve the problems that cause them. Frontline workers are asking for meaningful action on the conditions that prevent them from using their expertise effectively.

Their expertise should also be used beyond individual casework. Frontline workers should be treated not only as people who deliver services, but as a source of expertise that can inform how housing and support services, pathways and policies are designed, commissioned and improved.



Appendices

1. Survey respondents (total 1,229)

Where they are based

Country	% of respondents
England	75.5%
Northern Ireland	4.6%
Scotland	8.9%
Wales	11.1%

Organisation type

Organisation type	% of respondents
Charity	51.4%
Registered Social Landlord	20.5%
Local Government	14.9%
Health	7.2%
Community Organisation	3.4%
Other	2.6%

Job type

Job type	% of respondents
Accommodation provision (hostel or supported housing)	27.0%
Other, please specify...	19.3%
In tenancy support	14.7%
Homelessness advice	12.0%
Advice and welfare	8.6%
Health/wellbeing/substance use	8.2%
Outreach (rough sleeping)	4.3%
Homelessness assessment	3.7%
Social work	2.1%

Appendices

Length of service

Length of service	% of respondents
Up to 6 months	1.9%
7 to 11 months	2.5%
1 to 3 years	21.2%
4 to 6 years	20.0%
7 to 9 years	10.7%
10 years or more	43.7%

Organisation size

Organisation size	% of respondents
Large (over 100 staff)	64.1%
Medium (30–100 staff)	18.6%
Small (under 30 staff)	17.3%

Level

Level of responsibility	% of respondents
Frontline worker with no line management responsibilities	68.4%
Team leader	26.6%
Senior leader	5.0%

Age

Age	% of respondents
18–24	2.8%
25–34	13.9%
35–44	20.5%
45–54	28.5%
55–64	29.3%
65+	5.0%

Number of people supported

Number of people supported in last month	% of respondents
0	0.7%
1–9	15.7%
10–24	41.6%
25–49	25.7%
50–99	10.3%
100–199	3.5%
200+	2.6%

Note: Frontline workers were asked how many individuals they had supported through their role in the last month. However, some of the higher figures given may represent total people supported by the service, rather than individual contacts.

St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity is a homelessness charity that works UK-wide and year-round. Our vision is for everyone to have a safe place to call home and the support they need to keep it. Our work extends across all four nations – at the individual, community, regional, and national levels.

To achieve our vision we work in three linked areas: We help individuals directly into new accommodation through the provision of grants.

We support and champion frontline workers and capture and share learning based on their insight and experiences.

And we test, develop and share solutions to key issues and build support for them with the public and policy makers.



Stock photography: Steve Franck



Charity

St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity

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