

# Frontline Worker Survey 2022

## Experiences of frontline homelessness work

A report on staff working conditions, training and professional development, wellbeing and job retention



**Frontline  
Network**

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

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# 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.

## Key takeaways

- 1 Frontline workers are working under extremely challenging conditions.**
- 2 This is having a significant impact on staff wellbeing, and threatens to force frontline workers to leave the sector.**
- 3 We need to act now to support frontline staff responding to homelessness.**

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 experiences of staff working in frontline homelessness roles, including their working conditions, training and professional development, wellbeing and job retention. 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.

"[We] seem to be firefighting all the time due to poor funding, staff shortages and lack of affordable accommodation."

Frontline worker, South East England

"Staff are leaving services they love in droves to survive."

Frontline worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

"My only frustration with my current role is due to that I can see what could be possible if frontline workers had the time & resources made available to do all they would wish."

Frontline worker, South West England

"It's a meaningful job where I can really make a difference. Although it can be incredibly tough and hard going, it feels like a very privileged position to be trusted to give care and support."

Frontline worker, North West England



# Challenges on the frontline

Frontline staff are working under extremely challenging conditions. Lack of time, high caseloads and barriers to accessing training remain serious concerns. These issues all limit the effectiveness of support for people experiencing homelessness.

## Lack of time, high caseload and job insecurity:

**40%**

'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that they had enough time to do their job effectively. This is worse than the figure of 36% in 2021.

**32%**

'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that their caseload was manageable.

**27%**

'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that they felt secure about the future of their job. This is a slight improvement from the figure of 29% in 2021.

"The stress of not being able to help clients is ongoing and will just lead to more burn out as the housing crisis worsens."

Frontline worker, London

"My caseload is overwhelming and I am worried that something will go wrong somewhere due to lack of time and high demands."

Frontline worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

"My original 5- month contract has been extended multiple times, and I have had 6 managers in this time. I have had just 2 supervision sessions in 11 months, both with different managers."

Frontline worker, London

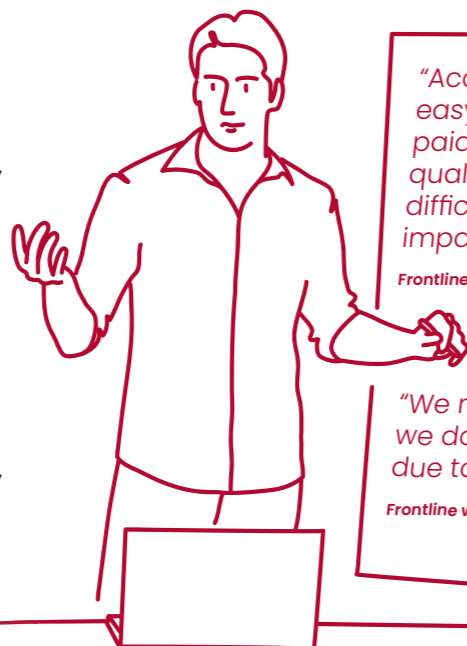
## Barriers to accessing training and gaps in knowledge

**44%**

of frontline workers said it was 'Very Difficult' or 'Difficult' to have time to undertake training

**30%**

of frontline workers said it was 'Very Difficult' or 'Difficult' to secure funding for training



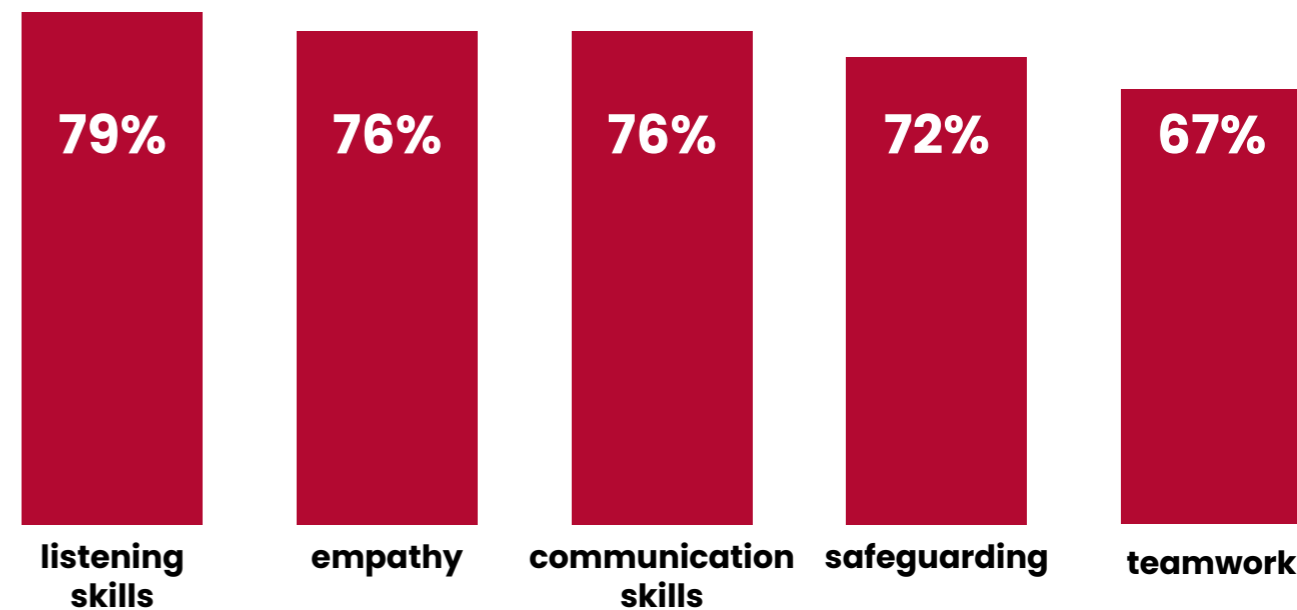
"Accessing free training is easy, however accessing paid courses with qualifications is extremely difficult but often the most impactful training to do."

Frontline worker, North West England

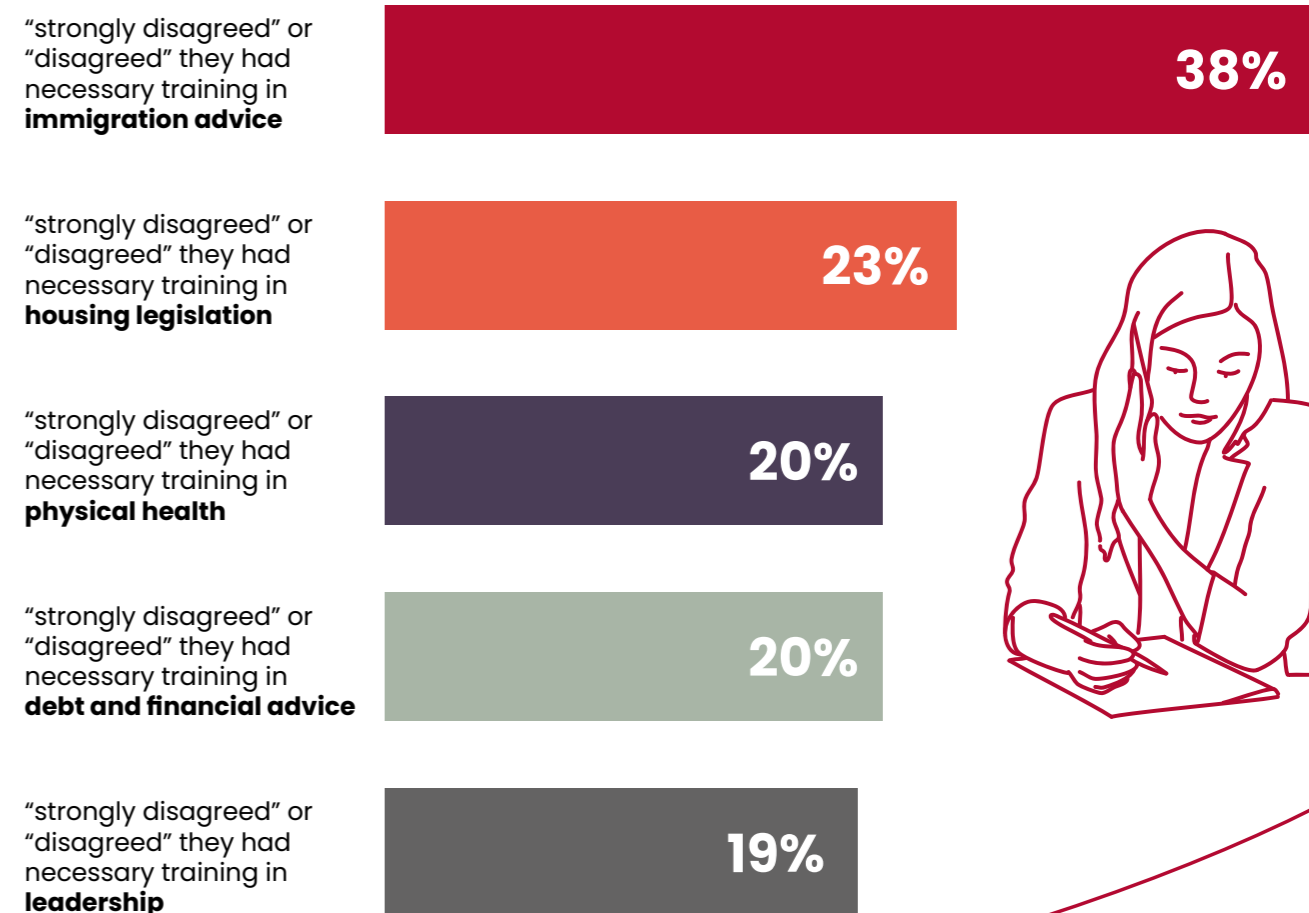
"We need more training, but we don't have time to do so due to demands of work."

Frontline worker, South West England

## The top five skills that frontline workers identified as "extremely important" for them to effectively do their work were:



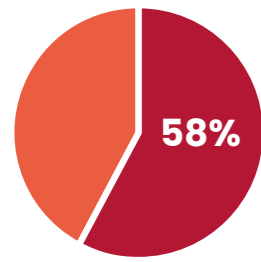
## The top five areas where frontline workers didn't feel they had necessary training to be able to provide effective support were:



# Impact on wellbeing and staff retention

Most frontline workers feel that their job negatively affects their wellbeing. While many frontline workers remain committed to their work, increasingly experienced and passionate staff members are feeling uncertain about their future in this sector. Unless action is taken to support frontline workers, staff retention in frontline services will become a major challenge.

## Impact on the frontline:



The majority (58%) of frontline staff felt that their role had a negative impact on their wellbeing. This is a slight improvement from 2021 (65%), when at the time of surveying staff were facing the emergence of the Omicron variant as part of the COVID-19 pandemic.



"I've been working in this sector for 9 years and I'm finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the levels of deprivation which my clients are having to live with. This is having a detrimental impact on my mental health and my ability to relax and spend quality time with my children."

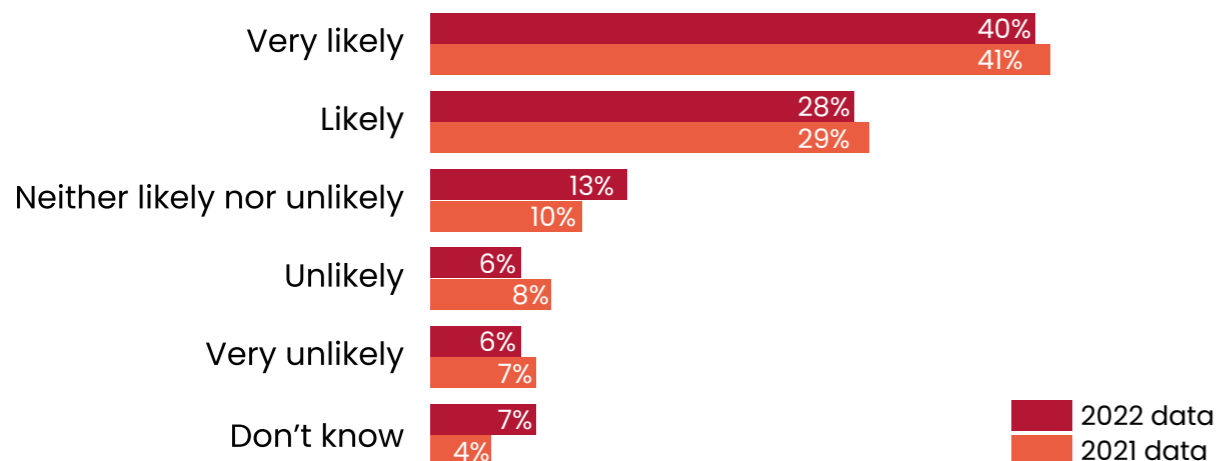
Frontline worker, Edinburgh and Lothians

## Struggles with staff retention:

68%

The majority (68%) of frontline workers thought it was 'very likely' or 'likely' they would continue working in the homelessness sector long-term. However in their comments, many staff highlighted their increasing uncertainty about this (see overleaf).

### How likely is it that you will continue working in the homelessness sector long-term?



Positively, frontline staff spoke about their enjoyment of their work, particularly building relationships with people and working in a team. Many also had a strong sense of purpose and drive to use their skills to make a difference, sometimes motivated by personal experiences of homelessness.

"I feel it's a meaningful job where I can really make a difference. Although it can be incredibly tough and hard going, it feels like a very privileged position to be trusted to give care and support."

Frontline worker, London

"This is where I should be, I believe that people should live happily in homes in an area where they want to be and can thrive."

Frontline worker, Glasgow and Strathclyde

However, some frontline workers expressed uncertainty about continuing to work in the sector. Reasons cited included the impact of the role on their mental health and wellbeing; low pay; lack of job security; not feeling supported by their organisation; and feeling disheartened or frustrated by the systemic issues and lack of resources.

"I love my job and helping people, but I feel we need more funding and support."

Frontline worker, London

"[I] find it very hard to deal with suicidal incidents, self-harming etc (triggering). Lack of compassion from management when you have to deal with a big incident. Do not feel very safe at work (have been caught in the middle of two knife-fights this year alone)."

Frontline worker, London

"Due to [the] shortage of permanent accommodation, I cannot make much difference to clients obtaining settled accommodation."

Frontline worker, West Midlands

"The pay does not reflect the work I do and will not contribute towards the life I need to build for my future. The low pay in this sector means it loses a lot of valuable workers."

Frontline worker, London

And these challenges, which cause knowledgeable and passionate people to leave the sector, have been worsened by the rising cost of living.

"I love it. I value it. It is worthwhile and ever more important. I just don't know if I can survive it when I have a young family because our work is intense and doesn't pay well!"

Frontline worker, London

"I can't afford to [stay in this sector] - my expenses do not even cover my petrol costs and my wages are minimal so am struggling with current economic climate."

Frontline worker, East of England





## We need to act now to support frontline services and staff members through this cost-of-living crisis...

**Rising costs have hit frontline services, many of whom were already stretched. Frontline workers are concerned about their ability to support people experiencing homelessness. The majority of frontline workers welcomed additional financial support for services to help address this issue.**

**86%** of frontline workers thought services needed additional support to help with the rising cost of living.

“Our service delivery is at risk of reduction due to increase in utility, salary uplifts and other costs which impact on a set funding pot which has not changed for 5 years and is not planned to change in the next 18 months.”

Frontline worker, West Midlands

**86%** ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that providing specialist utility support for homeless service providers was needed to help homelessness services and their workforce with the rising cost of living.

“Our electricity bill has almost tripled, we are a charity that provides those rough sleeping somewhere to wash & dry their clothes, shower and eat. This is more expensive but more in demand/higher need.”

Frontline worker, East Midlands

**81%** ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that providing an emergency inflationary uplift to commissioned services was needed to help homelessness services and their workforce with the rising cost of living.

“We are covering some costs, like fuel, that we should be paid, and we are even personally buying food and other items for people in need.”

Frontline worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

**80%** ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that uplifting the HMRC mileage rate to reflect the increases in cost of fuel was needed to help homelessness services and their workforce with the rising cost of living.

“We have been asked to adapt a flexibility to our work i.e., agile working which has accrued other personal costs i.e., heating/electricity use as well as increased petrol/ insurance/road tax costs. However, [...] my mileage has remained the same at 45p a mile.”

Frontline worker, Tayside, Central and Fife

“I love what I do and would love to be able to carry on doing it but unfortunately need to be making decisions for my own benefit – it’s hard to support people when you’re also struggling to keep the wolf from the door. I want to have stable accommodation and this income doesn’t provide that.”

Frontline worker, South West England

# We need to act now to equip frontline workers with the tools they need to do their jobs effectively...

**On top of ensuring that frontline homelessness organisations are suitably funded and resourced during this cost-of-living crisis, frontline workers also described changes needed to support their professional development and enable them to deliver effective support. This included improving working conditions, providing more opportunities for training, and implementing wider reforms and policy changes.**

In terms of working conditions, frontline staff highlighted the need for better job security and an uplift in pay to reflect the rising cost of living and the value and difficulty of frontline roles. Staff also raised the importance of having managers who listened and actively encouraged professional development. Furthermore reflective practice, clinical supervision and flexible working were suggested as practices which could support staff wellbeing and service delivery.

"[An] adequate salary [so] that I am not worried about meeting my own needs."

Frontline worker, North East England

"To actually know if I have a job. Currently we are waiting to hear if the service will receive funding – this has been a long-term issue. The service is losing staff as they are gaining more secure employment elsewhere. The job is hard enough without having this added stress."

Frontline worker, Glasgow and Strathclyde

"I have more recently a very good manager who is encouraging me and putting steps in place to make sure my case load remains manageable, previous to this my caseload was extremely high and stressful. I now feel a lot happier in my role and my wellbeing is better."

Frontline worker, London

"It will make a difference, if I can have reflective practice made available. This will help in my work capacity."

Frontline worker, London

"Having career paths laid out, with opportunities to shadow managers/more senior professionals and more training that is recognised."

Frontline worker, Yorkshire and Humberside



Crucially, frontline workers also stated that they needed more time, both to spend supporting people and to use for their professional development. It was suggested that this could be achieved through securing a full staff team, reducing caseloads and minimising time spent on administrative tasks. This would then enable staff to participate in training on soft skills such as leadership and resilience, and key topics such as housing legislation and immigration advice.

"There is always more to be done than there is time to do it. This can lead to a muddying of the work life balance. Although my employer strongly believes that a balance needs to be maintained, it can be difficult to do this because of the workload."

Frontline worker, South West England

"Regular and up to date training on benefits and housing as these changes so often information from prior training (in my example 4 years ago) is completely out of date."

Frontline worker, East Midlands

"More investment into the staff here and a full staff/management team would mean less churn which would equal a more stable and productive service. Then we could actually look at improving our offer to service users and doing more rather than constantly keeping our head just above water..."

Frontline worker, London

Lastly, frontline workers said that wider reforms and policy changes to address homelessness would enable them to work more effectively – themes we explore further in our third report.

"[We need] systems (Justice, Education, Council, Housing etc) being more human focused and less budget and cutting costs orientated. If they looked 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



**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 support frontline services through this cost-of-living crisis and equip frontline workers with the tools they need to do their jobs effectively.
2. Get in touch with us on [frontline@stmartinscharity.org.uk](mailto: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](https://frontlinenetwork.org.uk)
-  [SMITF\\_Frontline](https://twitter.com/SMITF_Frontline)
-  Sign up for our newsletter

### **Frontline Network**

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**Find out more about the work of St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity:**

-  [www.smitfc.org](https://www.smitfc.org)
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