

Scottish Housing Regulator

National Panel of Tenants and Service Users 2021/22

Report

Lead author: Chris Thornton

engage
scotland

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of findings from the 2021/22 programme of National Panel engagement commissioned by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Background

- 1.2. The National Panel was established in 2013 as a way for the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to engage with tenants and other users of social landlord services. The Panel is used to gauge service user priorities and experiences, and findings help to shape SHR's focus in its role as regulator of social landlords.
- 1.3. The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of service users. Members include social tenants, people who have used homelessness services, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and owners using social landlord factoring services. Ongoing recruitment ensures that the membership continues to include a mix of members across key groups, with Panel membership reaching a peak of 469 members by March 2022. The Panel is also widely promoted to reach those who do not normally engage with social landlords; for example, more than three quarters of Panel members are not involved in RTOs.

The 2021/22 programme

- 1.4. The 2021/22 Panel programme was developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to impact landlord services and service users. In terms of the main themes addressed, this year we asked Panel members about:
- Their current financial circumstances, how these have been affected by the pandemic, and views whether their rent represents good value for money;
 - Their experience of heating their home;
 - Experience of accessing landlord services digitally, and their interest in making more use of digital contact options to get in touch with their landlord; and
 - How they felt the pandemic has affected their landlord's services during 2021.
- 1.5. This year the Panel engagement approach returned to a combined quantitative and qualitative research after being limited to a survey-only approach in 2020/21. A survey was issued to all Panel members in January 2022, followed by in-depth qualitative engagement during February and March 2022 to explore the survey themes in more depth. The survey included questions across each of the five themes listed above, while qualitative engagement focused on views on how landlord services had recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, and about their current and likely future financial circumstances (including any difficulty heating their home).
- 1.6. This report combines quantitative survey results with qualitative findings, based on responses to the full Panel survey (45% response, 212 respondents) and qualitative engagement with 78 Panel members. We refer to those taking part as 'respondents' where this was via the survey, and 'participants' where this was via semi-structured qualitative interview. Direct quotes have been included from qualitative participants to illustrate key points. These comments have been lightly edited for brevity.

2. FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND AFFORDABILITY

Most (61%) feel that their financial circumstances are worse now than prior to the pandemic, including a quarter (25%) who feel significantly worse off. Increased cost of living and rents were seen as the biggest contributors to financial difficulties.

A quarter (25%) are not currently managing well financially, including 14% in financial difficulty. A similar proportion (28%) are not managing well with their housing costs.

Most (62%) struggle with unexpected expenses and a third (32%) often have to delay/miss paying a bill (up from 21% in the 2020/21 survey).

Around half (48%) feel their rent is good value for money, but more than a quarter (27%) feel their rent is poor value.

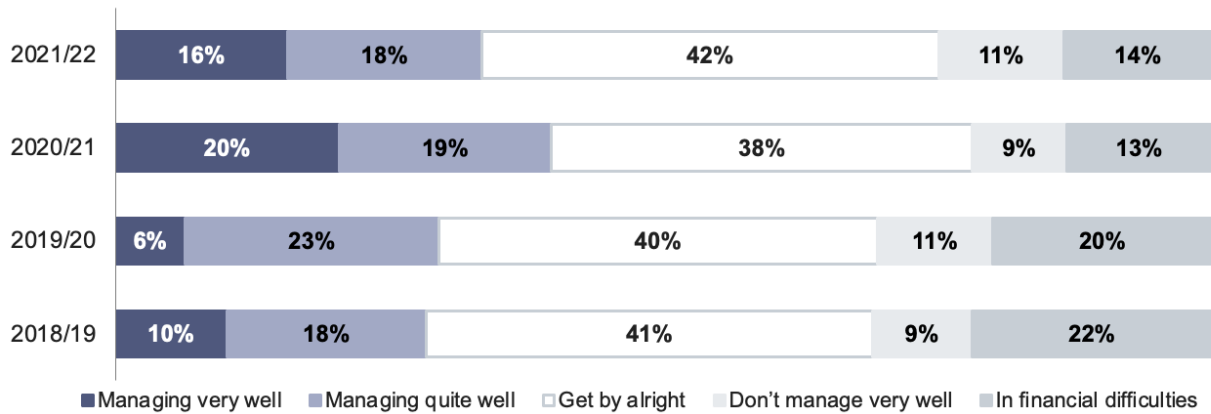
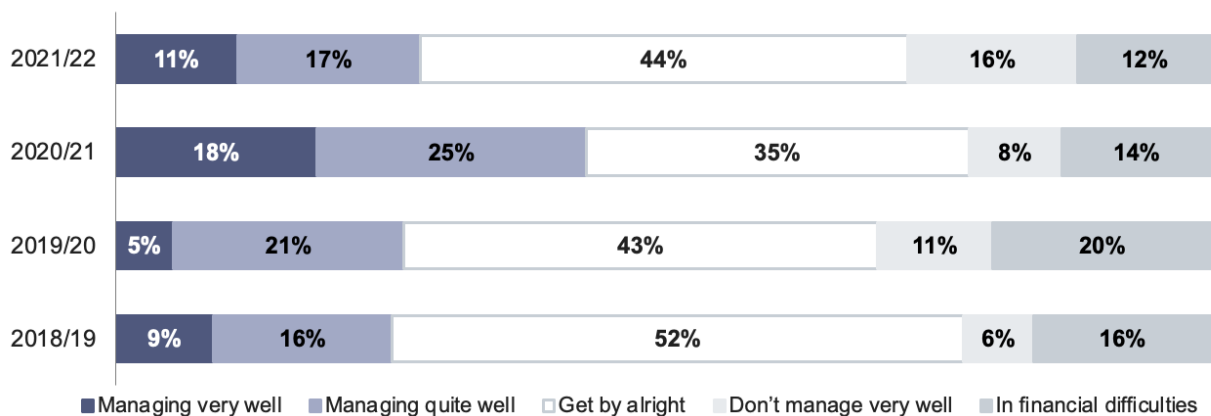
More than a quarter (28%) have experienced difficulties affording their rent in the last year, an 11-point increase on the 2020/21 survey. Feedback linked these difficulties to rent levels, heating costs and other living costs.

More than two thirds (71%) were concerned about future affordability of their rent, with these concerns most commonly related to future rent increases.

- 2.1. This section considers views and experienced around respondents' financial circumstances, and how these had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Views on current financial circumstances

- 2.2. The survey first asked about Panel members' current financial circumstances.
- 2.3. As Figures 1 and 2 show, a quarter (25%) of respondents indicated that they are not managing well with their finances as a whole, including 14% who are in financial difficulties. This is broadly similar to the 2020/21 survey, but represents a small improvement on the 2019/20 and 2018/19 surveys which found that around a fifth of respondents were having financial difficulties.
- 2.4. A similar proportion of respondents (28%) indicated that they are not managing well with their current housing costs (including rent, energy bills and other housing-related costs). This is also similar to the 2020/21 survey.
- 2.5. These findings were broadly consistent across key service user groups. However, under 60s were more likely than older respondents to be struggling financially; around half of those aged under 60 indicated that they were not managing well financially, both in terms of their general finances and specifically in relation to housing costs.

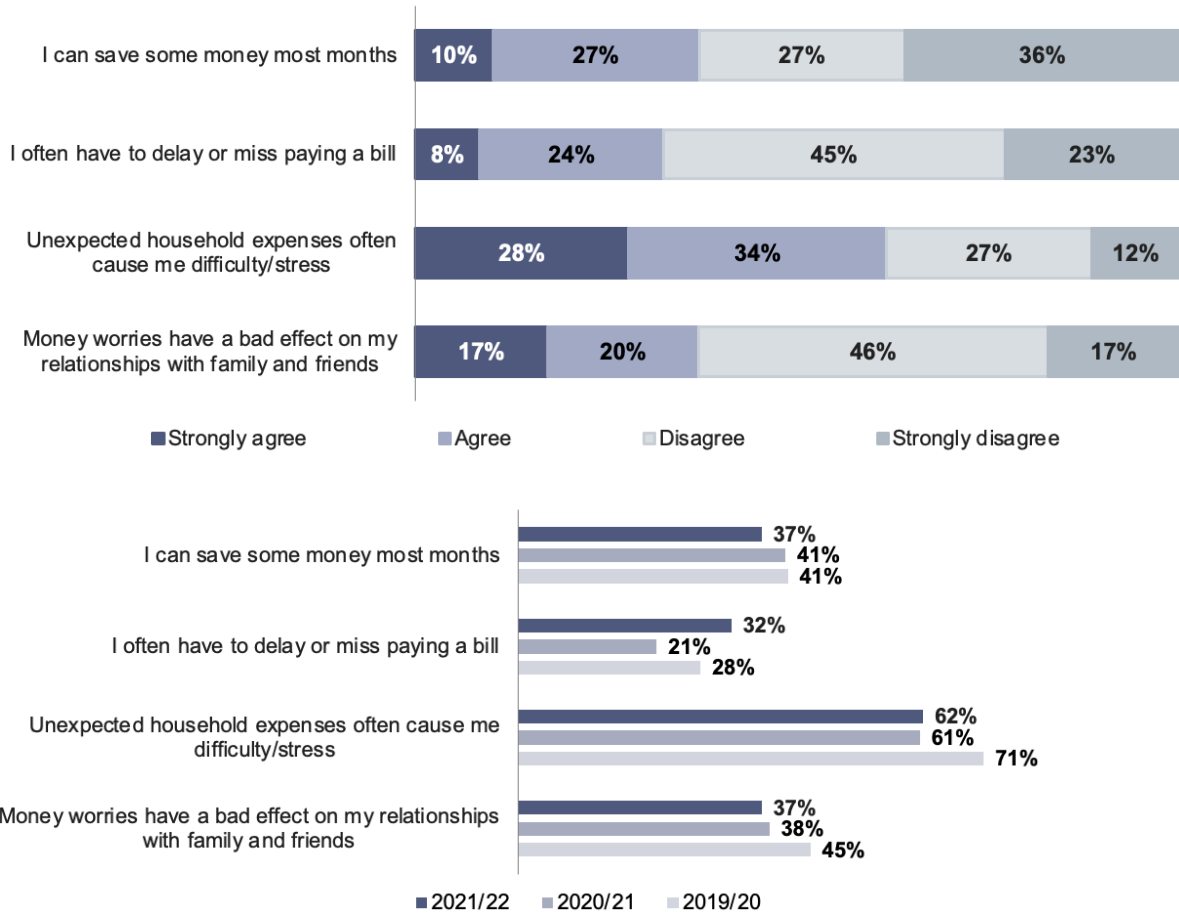
Figure 1: How managing financially at the moment**Figure 2: How managing to afford home at the moment**

2.6. Figure 3 summarises views on specific aspects of respondents' current financial circumstances. Consistent with findings noted above, this indicates that financial worries affect a relatively substantial proportion of respondents:

- Around a third (32%) of respondents often have to delay or miss paying a bill – up from a fifth (21%) in the 2020/21 survey;
- Nearly two thirds (63%) are not able to save money most months;
- Unexpected household expenses often cause difficulty or stress for the majority (62%) of respondents; and
- Money worries have a bad effect on relationships for more than a third (37%).

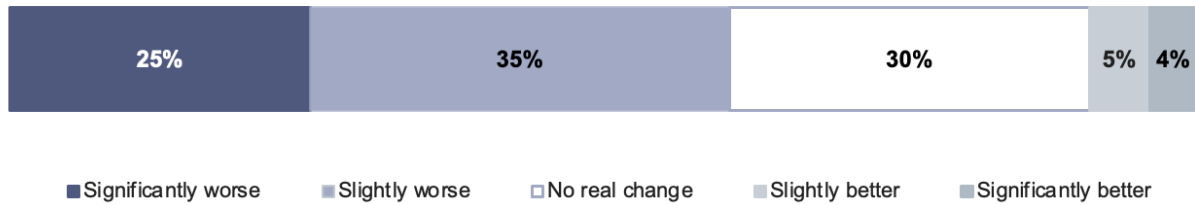
2.7. Also consistent with findings noted earlier in this section, those aged under 60 were most likely to have experienced financial worries. This was particularly so in relation to being able to save money, having to delay or miss paying bills, and money worries affecting relationships.

Figure 3: Views on financial circumstances at the moment



- 2.8. Figure 4 summarises respondent feedback on how their current financial circumstances compare with prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.9. Most respondents (61%) indicated that their financial circumstances are worse now than prior to the pandemic, including a quarter (25%) of all respondents who felt their finances are now “significantly worse”. These findings were broadly consistent across key service user groups, although under 60s (and particularly under 45s) were more likely than others to report “significantly worse” financial circumstances.
- 2.10. This balance of views was also reflected in qualitative feedback. Many participants reported experiencing financial difficulties, with some highlighting that they could not see when or how they might be able to improve their circumstances. These difficulties were primarily related to inflationary pressures. For example, several of those on low incomes and in receipt of benefits indicated that their income had not kept pace with increasing living costs, and had left them “really struggling to cope” even after taking steps to reduce their outgoings. As noted later in this section, these participants demonstrated significant anxiety at the prospect of further significant cost of living increases.
- 2.11. It should be noted that a small number of participants reported that they were in a better financial position than prior to the pandemic, primarily those who were still homeworking and had saved on travel and other costs associated with office-based working. However, these appeared to be the minority for whom household incomes had remained unchanged, and living costs had not significantly increased.

Figure 4: How current financial circumstances compare with prior to the pandemic



- 2.12. Figures 5 and 6 summarises views on the range of factors that have affected respondents’ financial circumstances since the start of the pandemic.
- 2.13. As this shows, a large majority of respondents have been affected by increased cost of living; more than 4 in 5 respondents (83%) indicated this. A substantial proportion of respondents (44%) also referred to rent increases having affected their financial circumstances, but relatively few mentioned reduced hours of work, income or benefits.
- 2.14. In terms of increasing living costs, respondents were most likely to refer to energy and food costs. More than 9 in 10 reported increases in energy and food costs (94% and 93% respectively), including two thirds (67%) of all respondents who felt that increased energy costs have had a “significant impact” on their financial circumstances. In addition, a large majority of respondents (84%) indicated that they had been affected by increases in the cost of other goods.
- 2.15. Respondent feedback was broadly consistent across key service user groups, but showed some variation by age group; those aged under 60 were more likely to indicate that they had been significantly affected by increases in energy costs and the cost of other (non-food) goods.

Figure 5: Factors affecting financial circumstances since the start of the pandemic

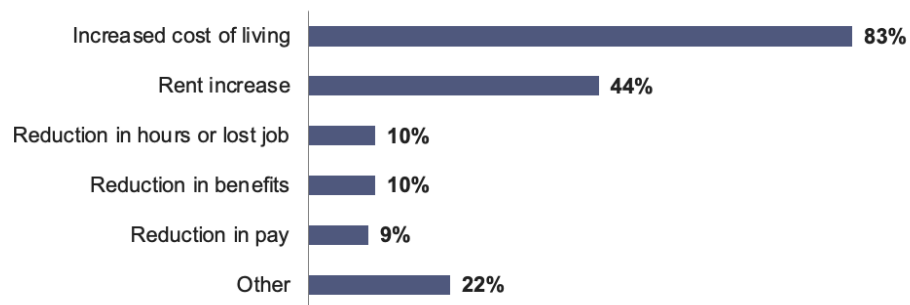
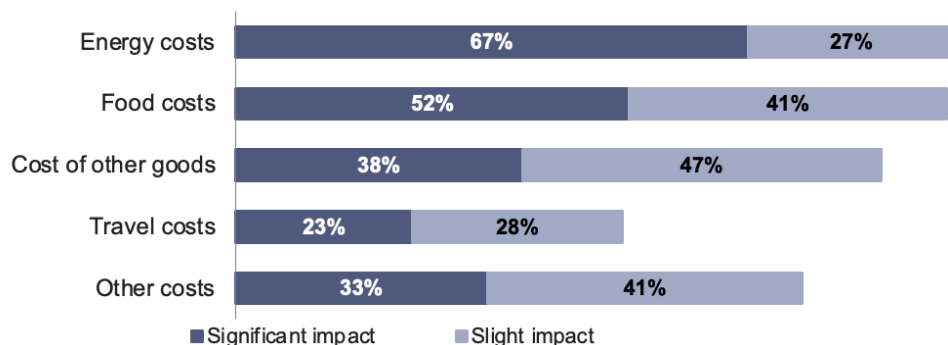


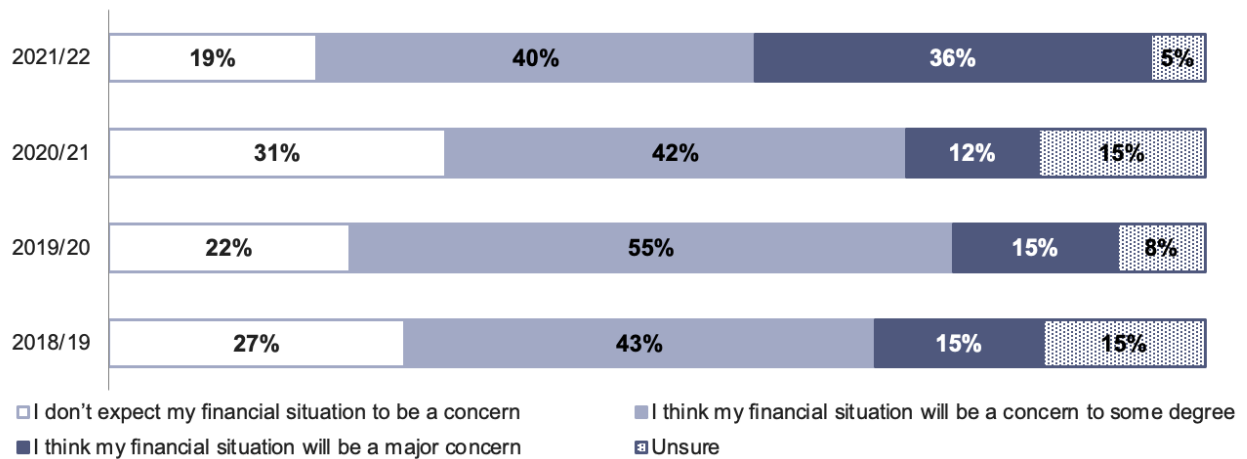
Figure 6: Whether financial circumstances have been affected by cost of living increases



Views on future financial circumstances

- 2.16. The survey also asked about Panel members' views on their future financial circumstances, and the extent to which they are concerned about these.
- 2.17. As Figure 7 shows, around three quarters (76%) of respondents expressed some concern about their financial circumstances over the next few years, including more than a third (36%) for whom their future financial situation was a "major concern". This represents a significant worsening since the 2020/21 survey, with a threefold increase in the proportion reporting that their future finances are a "major concern" (from 12% to 36%). Increased concern about the future was evident across all key service user groups.

Figure 7: Whether concerned about finances over next few years



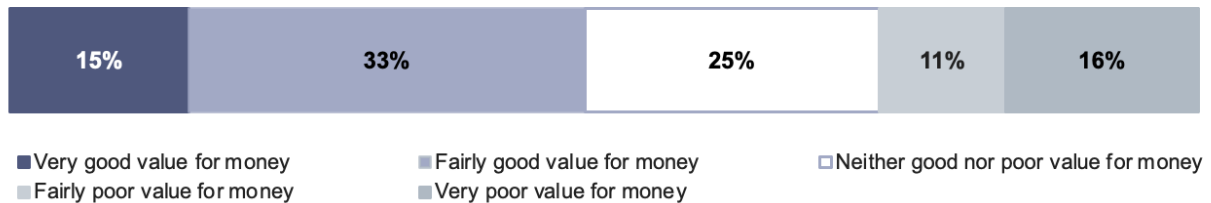
- 2.18. Qualitative feedback suggests that recent and anticipated increases in living costs were a key factor in participants' concerns about their future finances. Anticipated increases in heating costs in particular were closely linked to concern around future finances. For example, those living in newer and more energy efficient homes appeared less concerned about potential future energy cost increases. In contrast, those who already struggle to keep their home warm due to inefficient heating systems and/or poor insulation were very concerned about how increasing energy costs will affect their financial circumstances. One participant noted that they were already limited to using one storage heater at a time due to energy costs, and were unsure how they could further reduce their energy use without major improvement to the energy efficiency of their home.

Rents and other costs

- 2.19. The survey asked a series of questions around rents, including Panel member views on whether their rent represents value for money, experience of any difficulties affording their rent and/or other housing costs, and any concerns about future rent affordability.

2.20. As Figure 8 shows, around half (48%) of respondents felt that their rent is good value for money while around a quarter (27%) felt their rent is poor value for money. Consistent with findings discussed earlier in this section, those aged under 60 were less positive than older respondents about the extent to which their rent is value for money.

Figure 8: Whether rent is value for money



2.21. Panel members were also asked to consider what influenced their view of whether their rent represents value for money. Feedback highlighted the following key factors.

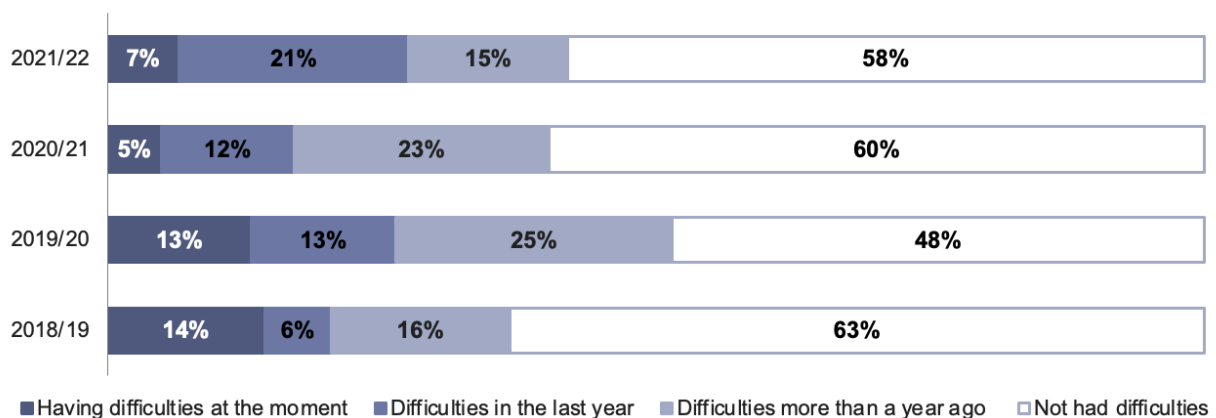
- **The level of rent**, and how this compares with rents charged by other landlords for homes of a similar size and type, and in a similar quality of area. This was primarily in relation to other social rents, but a small number also referred to how their rent compares with the private rented sector. Some also raised particular concerns around landlords implementing rent increases during 2021. These participants suggested that rent increases did not reflect the reduced service still being provided during 2021, nor acknowledge that some service users were still feeling the financial effects of the pandemic.
- **Quality of homes** provided by their landlord was primarily focused on the quality of the participant's own home, but some also considered the quality of other homes provided by their landlord in the local area. The quality of heating and energy efficiency, size of their home and the overall standard of repair appeared to be key considerations here. For example, some compared the energy efficiency of their own home unfavourably with newer properties provided by their landlord. It was suggested that this has become a significant driver of value for money judgements in the context of energy price increases.
- **Quality of service provided** was most commonly raised with reference to repairs and maintenance, including discussion around the speed of response to repairs requests and the quality of completed work. Capital investment also appeared to influence views; for example, those referring to recent improvement works to their home (such as heating system upgrades and insulation improvements) were typically more positive in their views on value for money. Some also noted that, while their rents were lower than those charged by other landlords, other tenants appear to receive a better service – including capital investment to improve energy efficiency. This reflected the importance of the overall quality of customer service, particularly how quickly landlords respond to enquiries. As noted above, service quality was seen as an issue in the context of landlords reducing service standards and/or stopping services as a result of the pandemic. Several participants noted that this had affected their view on the extent to which their rent was good value for money, even if they understood the need to reduce service standards to protect staff and service users.

- Several participants indicated that their landlord’s **approach to engagement and communication** also influenced their views on value for money of rent. This included reference to how well participants felt their landlord had kept them up to date during the pandemic, and the extent to which they feel that their landlord takes account of service user views in its decision making.

2.22. Figure 9 summarises respondent feedback on whether they have experienced difficulty affording their rent.

2.23. As this shows, 42% of respondents had experienced difficulties affording their rent, including 28% who had experienced difficulties in the last year, and 7% who are currently experiencing difficulties. This represents an increase since the 2020/21 survey in the proportion of respondents who had experienced difficulties in the last year, although results are similar to the 2019/20 survey. Survey results also show some variation across age groups, with under 60s more likely than older respondents have had difficulty affording their rent.

Figure 9: Whether experienced difficulty affording rent

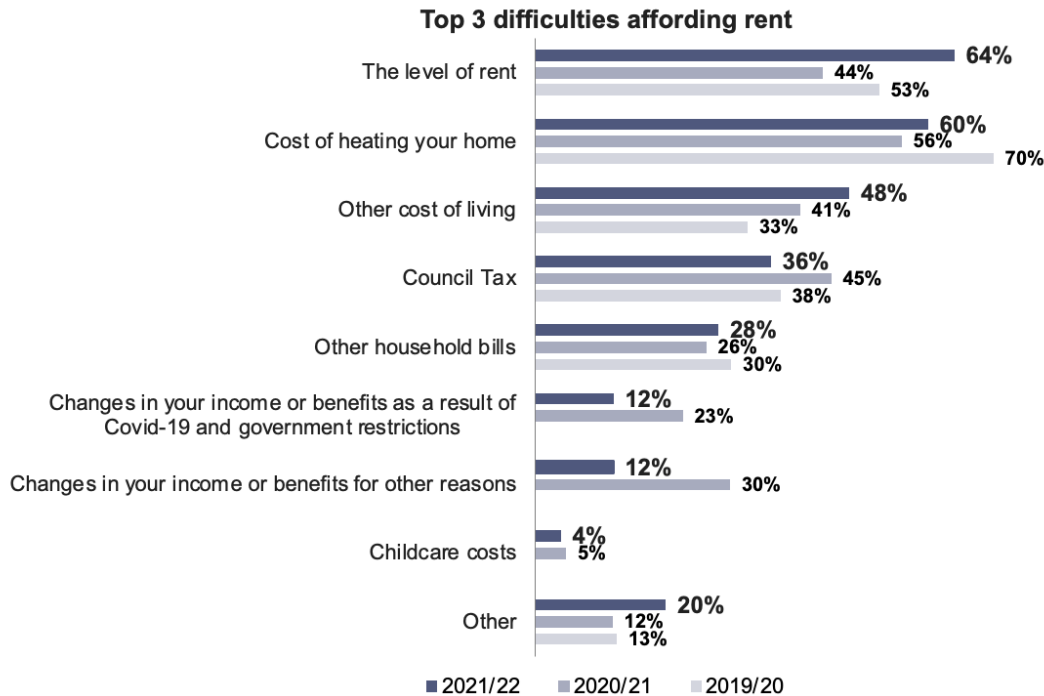


2.24. Figure 10 summarises the views of those with recent experience of difficulties affording their rent on the factors that have contributed to this.

2.25. This indicates that rent levels and heating costs were the most common factors for those struggling to afford their rent; rent levels were mentioned by 64% and heating costs by 60%. Other living costs (48%) and Council Tax (36%) were also commonly mentioned factors while respondents were less likely to mention changes to their income or benefits (each mentioned by 12%). “Other” contributing factors mentioned by participants included the impact of annual rent increases, and limited supply of smaller properties resulting in tenants having to pay higher rents for larger properties.

2.26. The overall mix of factors contributing to rent difficulties is broadly similar to that reported in previous surveys. However, there has been some year-to-year variation in the proportion of respondents mentioning specific factors. For example, reference to rent levels has increased from the 2020/21 survey, but this follows a reduction between 2019/20 and 2020/21. Similarly, the proportion of respondents mentioning heating costs has increased slightly since 2020/21, but remains below the proportion reported in 2019/20.

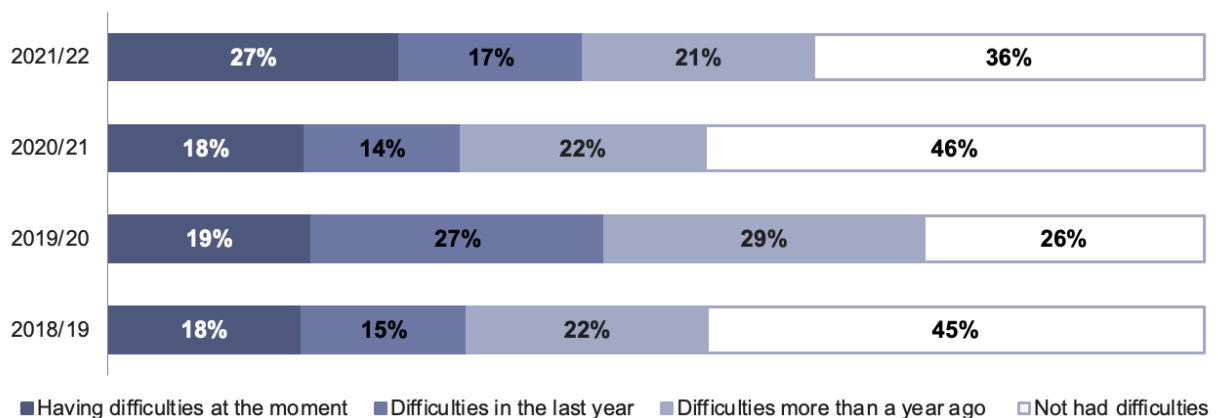
Figure 10: Factors contributing to difficulty affording rent



2.27. Figure 11 summarises respondent views on any difficulties they have experienced affording other, non-housing bills.

2.28. As this shows, around two thirds (65%) had experienced difficulties with other bills, including 43% who had experienced difficulties in the last year. This represents an increase on the 2020/21 survey (55% had experienced difficulty with other bills), although levels remain below the 2019/20 survey (74% had experienced difficulty). Consistent with findings in relation to rent costs, difficulties with non-housing bills appear to be most common for those aged under 60.

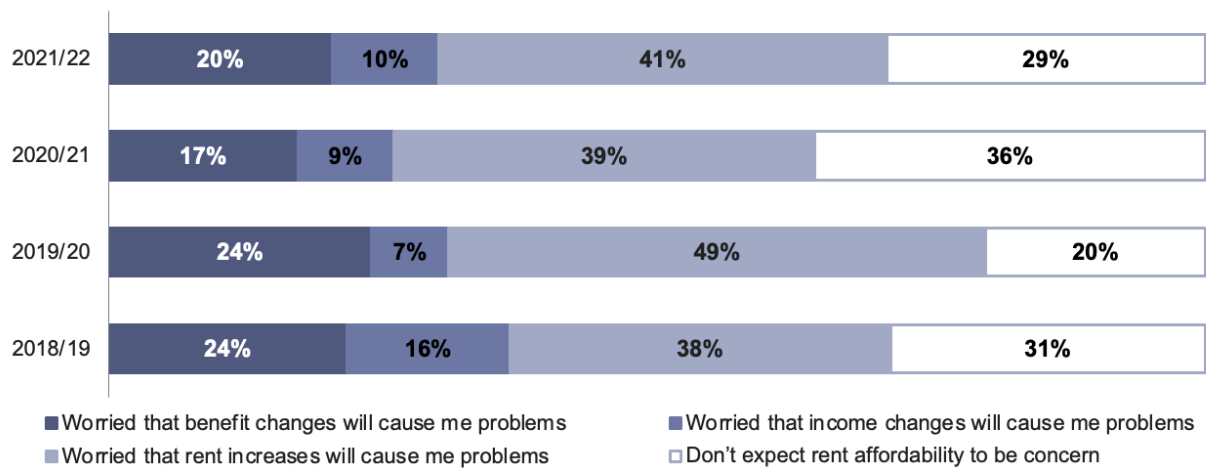
Figure 11: Whether experienced difficulty affording non-housing bills



2.29. As Figure 12 shows, more than two thirds (71%) of respondents expressed concerns about affording their rent over the next few years. This represents a small increase on the 2020/21 survey (where 65% expressed concerns) but remains below the 80% reported by the 2019/20 survey. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had experienced rent affordability problems were significantly more likely to express concerns about the future; nearly 9 in 10 of those who had already experienced difficulties also expressed concerns about the future.

2.30. Concerns about future rent affordability were most commonly related to rent increases; 41% expressed concerns about the impact of future rent increases on the affordability of their rent, compared with 20% concerned about future benefit changes and 10% about future changes to their income.

Figure 12: Whether concerned about affording rent over next few years



3. HEATING YOUR HOME

More than half (58%) of respondents had experienced difficulty heating their home, and nearly a third (31%) were having difficulties at the time of the survey.

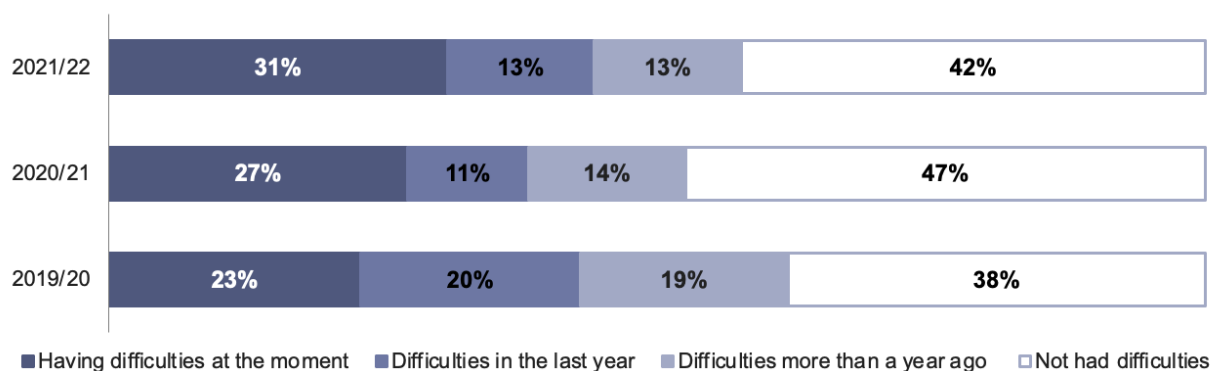
Those who had experienced difficulties affording their rent were significantly more likely than others to have also had difficulty heating their home.

Energy costs were the main factor contributing to respondents' difficulties heating their home – 85% mentioned this, more than double the proportion in the 2020/21 survey.

Around a quarter (26%) have had energy efficiency improvements to their home in the last 2 years, most commonly heating system and/or insulation upgrades.

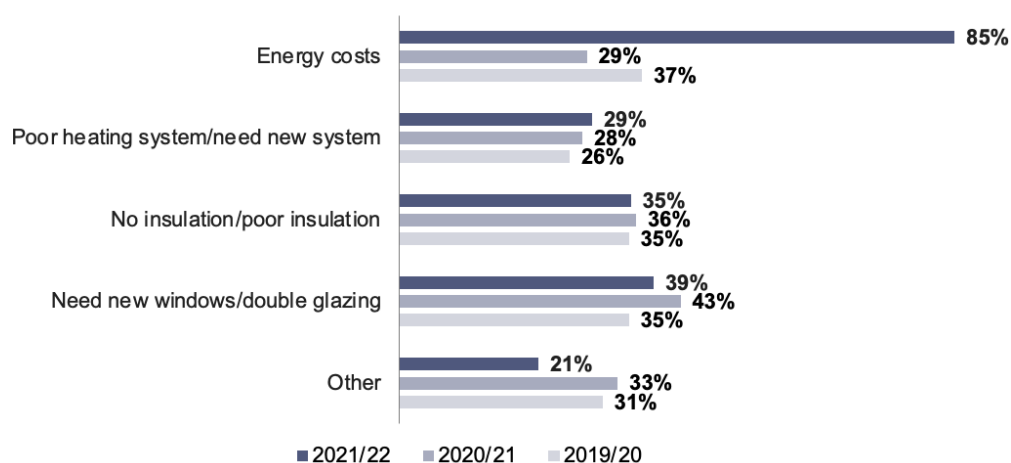
- 3.1. Panel members were asked a series of questions around their experience of heating their home, including whether they had experienced any difficulty heating their home, what had contributed to these difficulties, and any experience of energy efficiency improvements to their home.
- 3.2. As Figure 13 shows, more than half (58%) of respondents had experienced difficulty heating their home, including nearly a third (31%) who were having difficulties at the time of the survey. This balance of views falls within the range seen across previous surveys; for example, the proportion who had experienced difficulty heating their home has previously varied from 53% to 62%.
- 3.3. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had experienced difficulties affording their rent were more likely to have had difficulty heating their home; more than 9 in 10 compared with a quarter of those who have not had difficulty affording their rent. Survey results also indicate that those aged under 60 were more likely than others to have experienced difficulties heating their home.

Figure 13: Whether had difficulty heating home



- 3.4. As Figure 14 shows, energy costs were by some margin the most commonly mentioned factor contributing to difficulties heating their home. The great majority of respondents (85%) felt that energy costs had made it difficult for them to heat their home, more than double the proportion in the 2020/21 survey (29%). Other factors were significantly less commonly mentioned; for example, 39% referred to poor quality or condition windows and 35% to a need for better insulation.
- 3.5. Participants also mentioned “other” factors contributing to difficulty heating their home. In addition to comments reiterating concerns around energy costs, these were primarily examples of poor energy efficiency resulting in higher heating costs, such as inefficient heating systems, poor insulation and loss of heat through doors and windows. A small number also referred to health conditions requiring them to use their heating more often.
- 3.6. Comments from Panel members also highlighted the negative health and quality of life impacts associated with difficulty heating their home. These concerns were particularly acute for those with household members with health conditions, including risks around dampness and mould/mildew. However, participants also emphasised the negative impacts of a cold and damp home for all tenants, particularly where this continues for a relatively long period.
- 3.7. Feedback also highlighted the extent of participants’ concern around the potential future affordability of heating their home. For those who were already struggling to manage financially, anticipated increases in energy costs were a major concern. However, even those who felt that they are in a relatively strong financial position were worried about the impact of a significant increase in their heating costs. For some, this was compounded by concerns around the energy efficiency of their homes and heating systems.

Figure 14: Factors contributing to difficulty heating home



- 3.8. Around a quarter (26%) of respondents indicated that their landlord had made energy efficiency improvements to their home in the last 2 years, similar to findings in previous surveys.

- 3.9. Participants referred to a range of improvements, with most related to heating systems and/or the energy efficiency of their home. This included installation of new heating systems and/or replacement of radiators, upgrading of insulation to cavity walls, lofts and/or exterior walls. Several participants also referred to installation of new windows and of renewable energy generation technology.
- 3.10. Several participants had also requested repairs or improvements to their home with a specific focus on reducing heating costs. This included repairs to windows and doors to improve heat retention, and installation of over-bath showers to reduce water heating costs. Participants expressed significant frustration where these repair requests remained incomplete, with some suggesting that landlords should prioritise repairs which can help tenants to deal with rising energy costs.
- 3.11. Around half of those who had energy efficiency improvements made to their home indicated that they had seen a reduction in their heating costs as a result, although very few indicated that they had seen a 'big reduction'.

4. DIGITAL ACCESS TO SERVICES

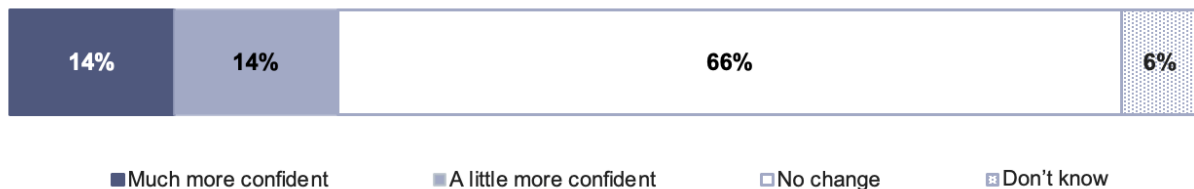
Respondents reported various changes to how they get in touch with their landlord during the pandemic, most commonly increased use of telephone and online contact.

There was widespread interest in use of digital options to access landlord services, especially for contact via website or email (more than 80% were interested in these). More than half are also interested in using 'live chat', SMS/WhatsApp or video chat.

Making more services available online and providing support with digital connectivity are the preferred means of encouraging more people to use digital contact options.

- 4.1. Panel members were asked to consider a range of questions on digital access to services including their experience of using digital contact options, and their interest in expanding use of digital options.
- 4.2. Most respondents (66%) indicated that their confidence in using the internet has remained largely unchanged since the pandemic (see Figure 15). However, there were more than a quarter (28%) who do feel more confident using the internet than prior to the pandemic. This finding was broadly consistent across key service user groups.

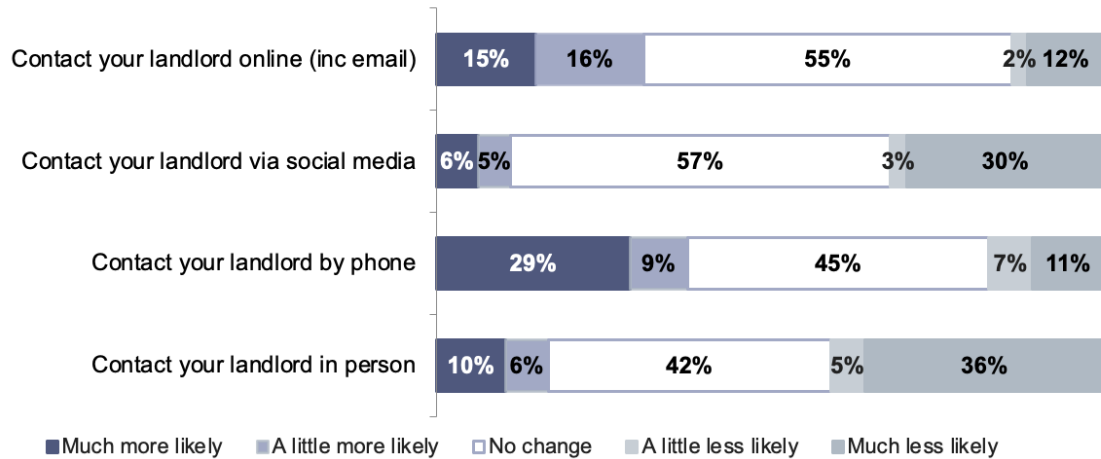
Figure 15: Confidence in using the internet compared with prior to the pandemic



- 4.3. A minority of respondents referred to some change in how they get in touch with their landlord since the start of the pandemic (see Figure 16). This was most commonly in relation to telephone and online contact; more than a third (38%) were more likely to get in touch with their landlord by phone than prior to the pandemic, and nearly a third (31%) were more likely to make contact online. In contrast, relatively few respondents (11%) felt that they were more likely to contact their landlord via social media than prior to the pandemic. These findings were broadly consistent across key service user groups.
- 4.4. As noted at Section 5, many participants suggested that they had experienced more difficulties reaching their landlord's services since the pandemic. Consistent with Figure 16, some of those reporting difficulties had tried digital alternatives, for example raising service requests by email or messenger apps. However, while these participants appreciated the availability of additional communication options, some were sceptical about the effectiveness of digital service access. The speed of response to digital requests was seen as crucial, with participants reporting multiple examples of services failing to respond to digital communication and suggesting that follow-up

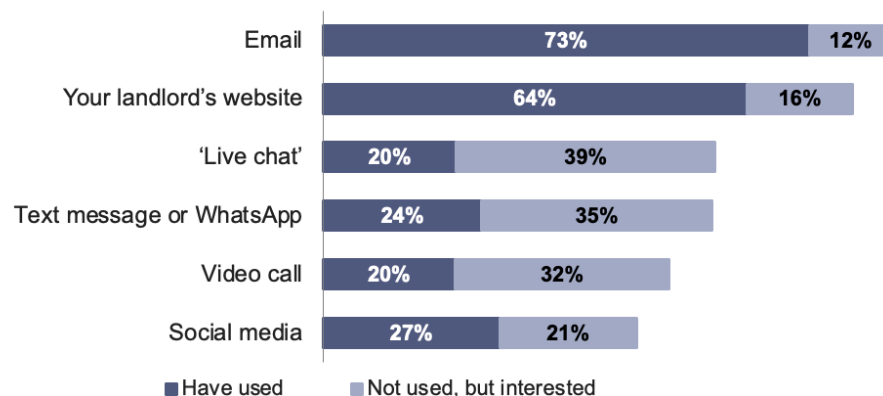
telephone contact was often required. These experiences appear to have fuelled a view amongst some that persistent telephone contact is the only reliable way getting through to landlord services.

Figure 16: Whether seen any change in how to get in touch with landlord



- 4.5. Survey responses demonstrated some interest in use of digital options to access landlord services (see Figure 17). This was particularly so for online contact; a large majority would consider contact via their landlord's website (80%) or email (85%). While most of these respondents already used digital options to contact their landlord, there remained a proportion who did not use online options but who would be interested in doing so (16% for their landlord's website, 12% for email).
- 4.6. Interest in other digital options was also relatively widespread. More than half of respondents already use or would be interested in using 'Live chat', SMS/WhatsApp or video chat to access landlord services. This included around a third of respondents who have never used these options but would be interested in doing so. Qualitative feedback suggests that text messaging or WhatsApp may be the most popular option, with a range of participants indicating that they would find this option appealing. Video calls were also seen as a potentially valuable option where tenants prefer to speak face to face, or for more sensitive requests. However, as noted earlier in this section, participants' interest in these options was caveated with concerns that landlords must ensure a timely response to digital contact.

Figure 17: Interest in digital contact options to access landlord services



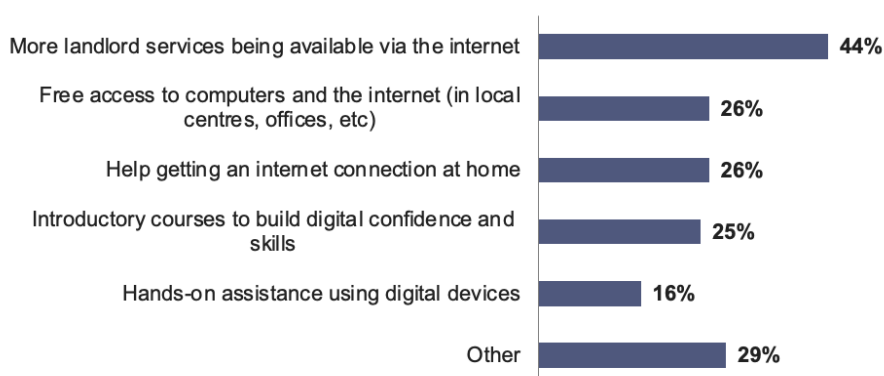
- 4.7. As Figure 18 shows, respondents would be most likely to use digital contact options to find information on their landlord's services (70% would sometimes or always use digital options for this) or to provide feedback to their landlord (66%). However, there was also widespread interest in using digital options to request a service (62%), make a payment (60%) or to submit a complaint (60%).

Figure 18: Likelihood of using digital contact options for specific purposes



- 4.8. Panel members were also asked what could encourage them to make more use of digital options. As Figure 19 shows, more landlord services being available online was the most common suggestion; 44% felt that this would encourage them to use digital contact options more often. In addition, around a quarter (25-26%) felt that support with digital connectivity (in local offices or their own home) and digital literacy could encourage them to make more use of digital options.
- 4.9. Participants also suggested "other" changes or initiatives that could encourage more use of digital contact options. These included ensuring tenants can be confident that digital service requests will receive the same speed and standard of response, a better and easier to use website, providing a "tenant's portal" through the landlord's website to check on service requests and rent payments, and having higher speed internet in tenants' homes.

Figure 19: What could encourage greater use of digital contact options



5. LANDLORD SERVICES DURING 2021

Around half (48%) felt that their landlord's overall response to the pandemic during 2021 had been good while nearly a third (32%) felt the response had been poor.

A large majority (84%) felt that their landlord's services had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 - more than half felt services had been 'significantly' affected.

The most common impacts were the temporary stopping of some services, longer service timescales, and not being able to use participants' preferred contact methods.

A large majority (78%) felt that their landlord had maintained some key services during the pandemic. Respondents were most likely to have seen negative impacts on repairs, ease of contacting services, and dealing with antisocial behaviour.

Less than half (43%) felt that their landlord had kept them well informed about services.

The overall balance of views on services was similar to that reported in previous years.

5.1. This section considers views on how landlords' services have been affected by COVID-19 and associated government restrictions. Respondents were asked specifically to think about their experience of services during 2021; the 2020/21 survey had focused on Panel members' experiences during 2020.

5.2. It is important to note that there was significant variation in COVID-19 case rates and associated government restrictions during 2021. For example, most landlord services will have been significantly limited by strict COVID-19 rules in the early part of 2021, while regional variation in restrictions meant that landlords in some areas continued to be under strict COVID-19 rules into summer 2021. The survey asked about Panel members' experience of landlord services across 2021 as a whole and feedback is therefore likely to reflect experience of services under varying levels of government restrictions.

Impact on landlord services

5.3. Figure 20 summarises respondent views on the extent to which their landlord's services have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic during 2021.

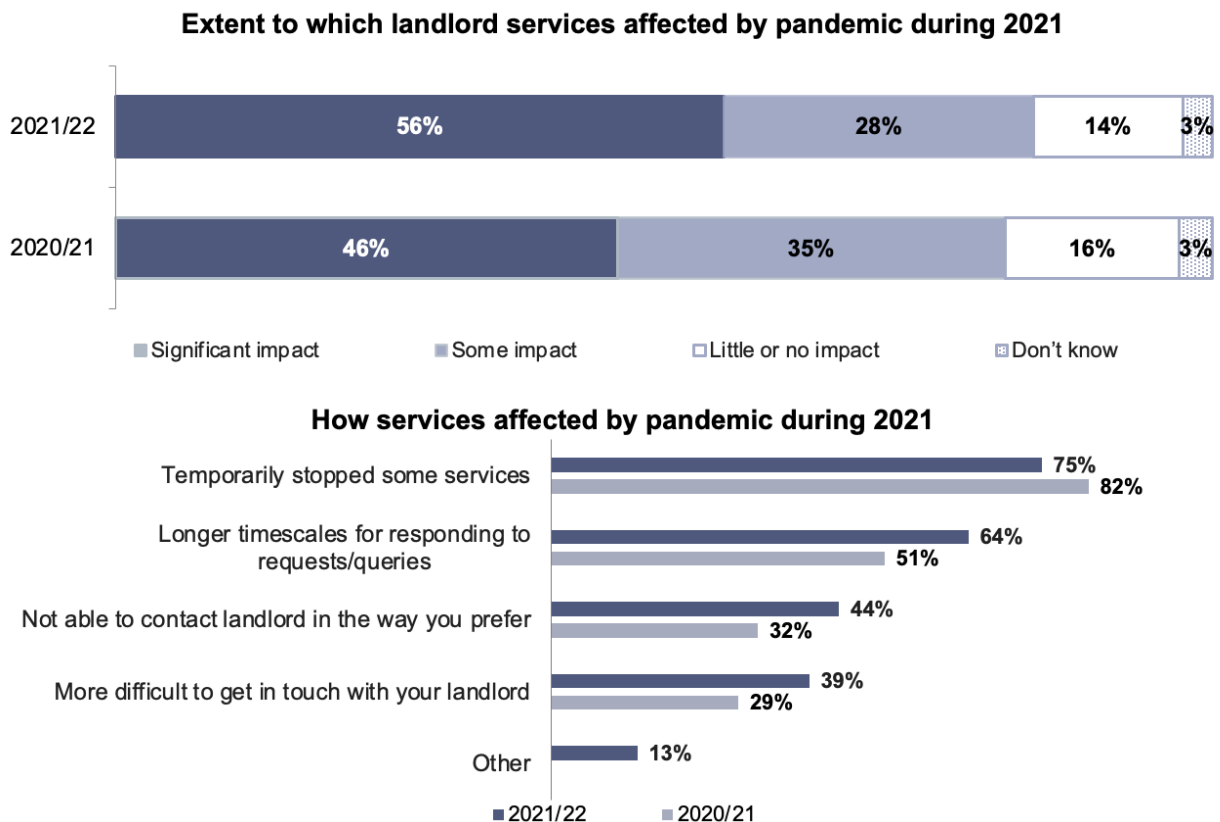
5.4. A large majority (84%) felt that their landlord's services had been affected to some extent, including 56% who felt that the pandemic had a "significant" impact during 2021. Around 1 in 7 respondents (14%) felt that the pandemic had little or no impact on their landlord's services during this period. This balance of views was similar to that reported in the 2020/21 survey, and was also broadly consistent across key service user groups – although those aged under 60 were more likely to feel that the pandemic had a significant impact on their landlord.

5.5. In terms of how respondents had seen their landlord's services affected by the pandemic, this was also similar to the 2020/21 survey with the most common impacts

being temporary stoppage of some services (75% reported this) and extended service timescales (64%). In addition, nearly half (44%) had not been able to contact their landlord in the way in which they preferred, and more than a third (39%) had found it more difficult to get in touch with their landlord.

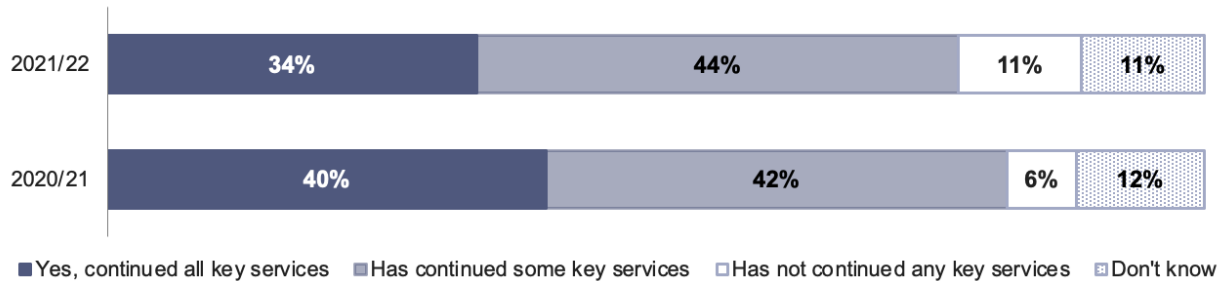
- 5.6. Qualitative feedback confirmed that stopping of services and a reduction in service standards were the most significant impacts associated with the pandemic during 2021. Participants also referred to other impacts, most commonly related to difficulties contacting services. Many participants indicated that it is more difficult to contact their landlord now than prior to the pandemic, although most agreed that this had improved since the height of the pandemic. Reference was made to long telephone queues at all times of day, and a view that landlords still lack the staffing capacity to meet service demand. For example, several participants referred to service disruption which they associated with staff working from home, such as difficulty reaching specific housing officers.
- 5.7. However, while most of those providing comment reported some reduction in services, it should be noted that others reported a more positive experience. These respondents suggested that they had seen little or no change in ease of contacting their landlord during 2021.
- 5.8. Survey results suggest some variation in experience across service user groups, with Council tenants more likely than RSL tenants to have experienced extended service timescales, and under 60s more likely to have had difficulty contacting their landlord.

Figure 20: Perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on landlord services



5.9. As Figure 21 shows, a large majority of respondents (78%) felt that their landlord had continued to provide at least some key services, including 34% who felt that all key services had continued. Around 1 in 10 (11%) felt that their landlord had not continued any key services. This balance of views was similar to that reported in the 2020/21 survey and was broadly consistent across key service user groups, although older respondents (aged 60+) were generally more positive than others.

Figure 21: Whether landlords continued to provide key services during 2021

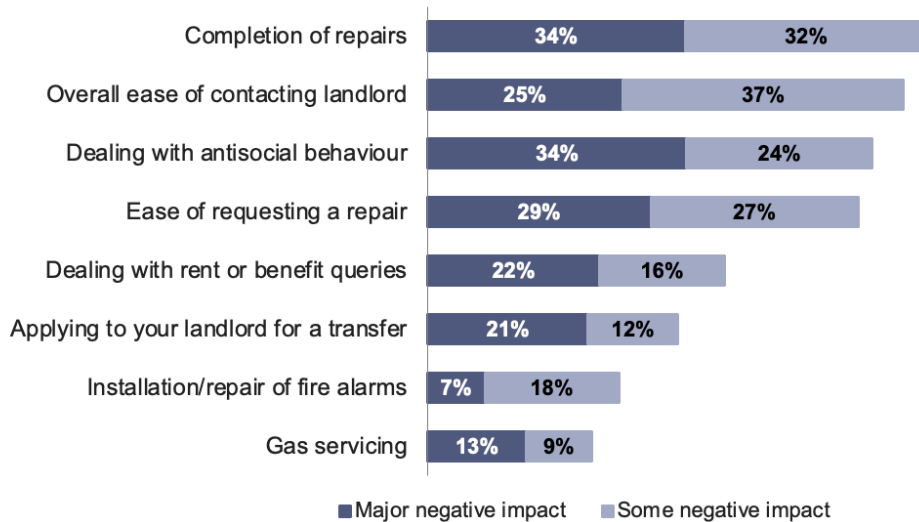


5.10. Panel members were invited to provide further detail on how their landlord's services had been affected by the pandemic during 2021. Participants referred to a number of specific services which they felt had been particularly badly affected:

- Limitation to repairs services. This was most commonly the ceasing or delaying non-emergency repairs, highlighted as a particular concern for those with disabilities or other health conditions. Some also referred to cancelling or re-scheduling of planned maintenance and improvement works.
- Ceasing stair, close cleaning, garden maintenance and open space maintenance. Some were not clear on why primarily outdoor services were affected by the pandemic, and expressed frustration that they continued to be charged service charges despite services being reduced or stopped.
- Limitation to on-site services for sheltered and other housing developments.

5.11. Figure 22 summarises respondent views on how specific landlord services had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic during 2021. This indicates that respondents were most likely to have seen a negative impact on completion of repairs (65% indicated this), ease of contacting their landlord (62%), dealing with antisocial behaviour (58%), and ease of requesting a repair (56%). In contrast, around 1 in 5 had seen an impact on gas servicing and a quarter on fire alarm installation/repair, although this may reflect a smaller proportion of respondents having used these services in 2021.

5.12. This balance of views was broadly consistent across key service user groups, although younger respondents (under 60) were generally more likely to have seen a negative impact on their landlord's services, particularly for repairs and ease of contacting their landlord.

Figure 22: Perceived impact of COVID-19 pandemic on aspects of landlord services during 2021

5.13. In considering how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their landlord's services during 2021, some reflected positively on their landlord's approach to maintaining key services during 2021. This included a view that service reduction or delays were "completely understandable" to minimise risk to staff, contractors and tenants. Others were more sceptical about the continuing need for service disruption, repeating a view expressed through the 2020/21 survey that the pandemic has been "an excuse" for reduced service standards.

5.14. Below we summarise key points raised by respondents in relation to each of the service aspects listed at Figure 22 – i.e. repairs, gas servicing and fire alarms, antisocial behaviour, rents and benefits, and applying for a transfer.

5.15. Respondents made the following comments in relation to impacts on **repairs services**:

- Examples of repairs being delayed or remaining incomplete included concern that a "backlog" of repair cases due to temporary service stopping or reduction is now contributing to longer repair timescales. This was seen as a particular issue for non-emergency repairs, and some noted that even relatively minor repairs can have a negative impact on tenants where they persist over an extended period. Some suggested that repairs and maintenance should be prioritised to clear the backlog of cases.
- While many participants acknowledged the necessity of stopping or reducing services, some felt that their landlord's communication around this could have been better. Some had been unclear about the status of their landlord's services at times during 2021. Participants also reported having difficulty reaching landlord repair services to report and/or check on the status of delayed repairs, including examples of individuals who were still unclear about the status of their repairs at the time of the research.
- Equity concerns were raised around the approach to stoppage or reduction in repairs. For example, some tenants of national or regional landlords felt that they appeared to have received a lower level of service than other areas, for example suggesting that non-emergency repairs had re-started earlier in some areas. Again this may reflect a lack of clarity around service changes.

5.16. Respondents made the following comments in relation to impacts on **gas servicing and fire alarms**:

- Some participants indicated that they had not seen any obvious change in gas servicing and fire alarm services, including comments contrasting this with the reduction in repairs services.
- Others indicated that the pandemic had resulted in delays to gas servicing and fire alarm services during 2021. Again, this included concerns around the backlog of cases which landlords are facing as services have restarted.

5.17. Respondents made the following comments in relation to impacts on **antisocial behaviour**:

- Some felt that there had been a reduction in antisocial behaviour during periods of stricter government restrictions in 2021, although others reported more frequent noise disturbance as a result of more people working at home.
- Several participants cited instances of antisocial behaviour during 2021 relating to noise disturbance and control of dogs. These participants had difficulty reaching services to report antisocial behaviour. There was also concern that landlords were constrained in their capacity to fully investigate complaints due to limitations on staff visiting communities during periods of homeworking.

5.18. In relation to impacts on **rents and benefits**, a small number reported examples of their landlord working to help those affected by the pandemic, for example to maximise benefits and income. However, there were some complaints around the time taken to reach a staff member by phone, and timescales for a response to queries – some indicated that they had found it more difficult than usual to resolve any problems with rents and benefits. Some also felt that rent increases during 2021 undermined landlords' work to support those affected by the pandemic

5.19. In relation to impacts on **applying for a transfer**, several participants indicated that their landlord had suspended transfers during the pandemic, including examples of tenants having transfer requests refused.

5.20. In addition to discussion of impacts on specific services, participants also considered their landlord's services as a whole and the extent to which these had recovered from the pandemic. While some noted the continuing impact of backlog need accumulated during the pandemic, there was also a view that services should have largely recovered from the pandemic by the end of 2021. Respondents gave a clear message that service standards have improved since the height of the pandemic, but some were frustrated that services have not fully recovered, and referred to what were seen as significant remaining gaps in service standards or provision.

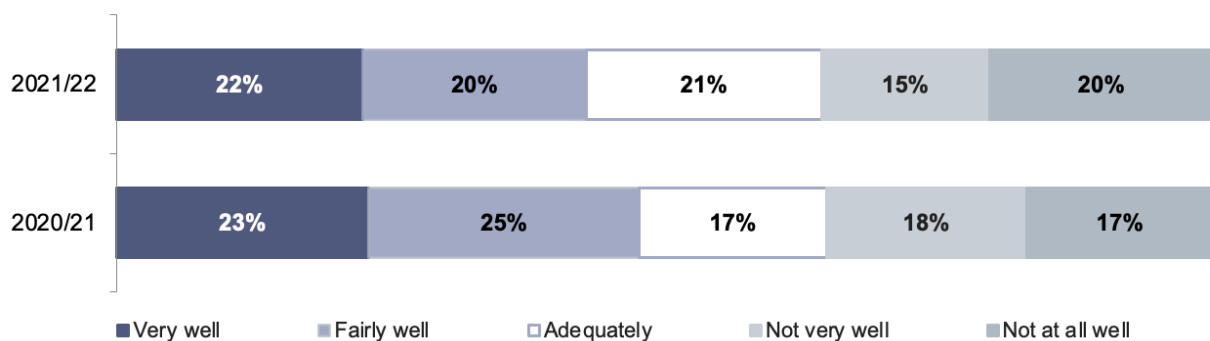
5.21. Many participants felt that their landlord's services as a whole are less responsive than prior to the pandemic, including examples of difficulties getting through to services and being required to chase up service requests. Some commented that these were not new issues but suggested that service responsiveness had worsened during the pandemic. Several participants attributed these issues to continuing home or hybrid working for service staff. Some expressed support for more flexible working

arrangements but suggested that landlords should be able to maintain a better standard of service.

Keeping service users informed

- 5.22. Figure 23 summarises respondent views on how well their landlord kept them informed about services during the pandemic. As this shows, 43% of respondents felt that their landlord had kept them well informed, including 22% who felt that they had been ‘very well’ informed. However, there remained more than a third (36%) who felt that their landlord had not kept them well informed about services.
- 5.23. The balance of views was very similar to the 2020/21 survey, but respondents aged under 60 were again less positive about their landlord; only a quarter (25%) of those aged under 60 felt their landlord had kept them well informed about services.

Figure 23: Views on how well landlords kept service users informed about services during the pandemic

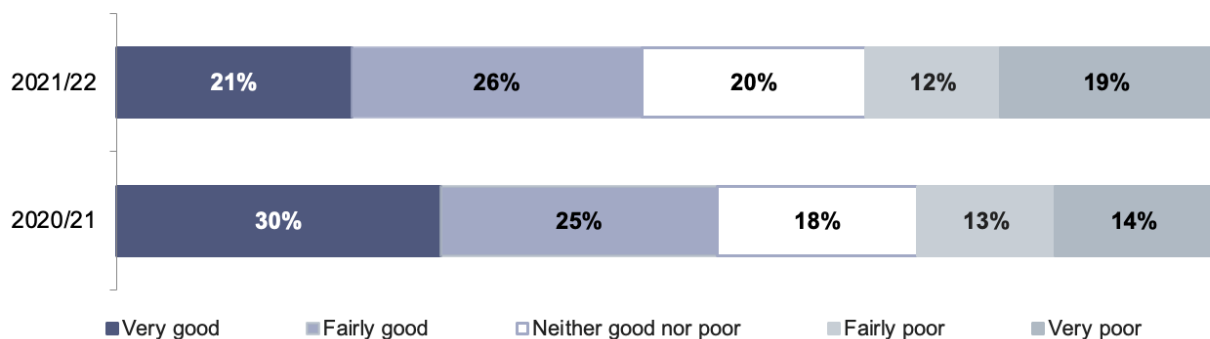


- 5.24. Participants were also invited to consider if there was any other information they would have liked on their landlord’s services during 2021. Specific suggestions included:
- Updates as service opening hours and contact options changed during the course of the pandemic.
 - Updates on changing service standards as a result of the pandemic, including timescales for emergency and non-emergency repairs, and updates on planned maintenance or improvements that had been delayed by the pandemic.
 - Information on how to reach key staff members such as specific housing officers.
 - More welfare checks on tenants affected by the pandemic.
 - Suggestions that landlords could make better use of social media channels to share advice and links to support for vulnerable people.

Views on landlord response to the pandemic in 2021

- 5.25. Figure 24 summarises respondent views on their landlord's overall response to the pandemic during 2021. Around half (48%) of respondents rated their landlord's response as very or fairly good. Nearly a third of respondents (32%) rated their landlord's response as very or fairly poor.
- 5.26. This balance of views was similar to that reported in the 2020/21 survey and was broadly consistent across key service user groups. However, as was the case in relation to other aspects of landlord services, those aged under 60 were less positive about their landlord's response to the pandemic.
- 5.27. Views on landlords' overall response to the pandemic also varied dependent on respondent views on specific aspects of their landlord's services during 2021. This was particularly the case in relation to whether landlords had kept service users informed about their services, and the extent to which they had continued to provide key services. For example, those who felt that their landlord had continued all key services and those who felt that they had been kept well informed were more positive than others about their landlord's overall response to the pandemic.

Figure 24: Overall rating of how landlord responded to the pandemic



- 5.28. Participants were also asked about any positive aspects of their landlord's response to the pandemic during 2021, that they would like to retain as services continue to recover. The key positives identified by participants are summarised below:
- In relation to communication, participants would like landlords to continue to build on use of digital connectivity to expand the range of options for tenants to contact and use landlord services, and to ensure participation events are as inclusive as possible. This was most commonly in relation to messaging services and video calls.
 - There was support for the focus on the most vulnerable tenants and service users during the pandemic, and calls for more outreach work including staff having a greater presence in local communities.
 - Also in relation to ensuring service users can access landlord services, participants emphasised the importance of keeping service users up to date as service models evolve (opening hours, changes to staff working arrangements, etc).

PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Panel seeks to engage with a good cross-section of tenants and service users. Current members include social tenants, people who have used homelessness services, tenants of social rented Gypsy/Traveller sites and owners using social landlord factoring services. In terms of the wider Panel profile, the focus is on ensuring membership includes representation across all socio-demographic groups, rather than achieving an exact match to the wider service user population. In this context, some groups such as those in rural areas have been over-sampled to ensure sufficient volume for more focused engagement within these groups.

Ensuring a balanced Panel membership is also a key element of ongoing promotion and recruitment work. This seeks to expand the reach of the Panel in terms of the size of the membership and representation of specific population subgroups. Total Panel membership stands at 469 at the time of reporting.

The current Panel profile suggests several areas where further expanding Panel membership would improve representation. As noted above, the aim of ongoing recruitment and promotion work should be on ensuring a sufficient number of members within specific groups, rather than an exact match with the wider population. In this context, the current Panel profile suggests recruitment should seek to boost numbers of black and minority ethnic members, factored owners and potentially those aged under 35.

A profile of the current Panel membership is provided below.

Current membership		469
Age		
Under 35		15%
35-44		15%
45-59		29%
60-74		28%
75+		9%
Unknown		3%
Gender		
Woman		55%
Man		45%
In another way		1%
Housing tenure		
Council tenant		39%
RSL tenant		42%
Owner		7%
Gypsy/ Traveller site resident		7%
Unknown		6%
Ethnicity		
White Scottish, British or Irish		86%
White other (inc Scottish Traveller, Gypsy/ Traveller)		9%
Black Minority Ethnic		3%
Unknown		3%
Disability		
1 or more disabilities		37%
No disability		48%
Unknown		15%
RTO membership		
Member of RTO		22%
Not a member of RTO		78%