

# How to Help Homeless People



## A guide for churches, faith and community groups

The number of homeless people is increasing, and some of them will turn to their local church or community for help. It can be hard to know how to help because homeless people often have multiple needs, and accessing support services is complicated. The purpose of this guide is to help churches and community groups respond to this growing need safely and effectively.

There are many reasons why people lose their home. It may be due to a relationship breakdown, physical or mental illness, debt, addiction, or simply the end of a tenancy. There are also those who grew up in an abusive household or in care, and have never had a truly safe and secure place to call home. Every homeless person is an individual with their own unique story. It is important to show an interest, and listen to them.

This guide gives information on helping people at different stages of homelessness: from those about to be evicted, to long-term rough sleepers who call asking for money. It also provides advice on personal safety, and practical ways in which your church or community group can help.

### **Usually the best way to help someone is to put them in touch with local services.**

Finding appropriate support can be difficult, as services and eligibility criteria vary from place to place. This guide comes with a display poster designed to be filled in with details of your local services, so that they are to hand when someone calls.



# What is homelessness?

There are hundreds of thousands of people in England who do not have suitable accommodation on any given night. Some of them are sleeping on friends' sofas or floors; some are sleeping in abandoned buildings or tents; some of them are sleeping on night buses or pavements.

Even having a home does not mean that someone is secure. More people now rent in the private sector than in the social housing sector. Rents have risen ahead of incomes, and this, along with benefits cuts and sanctions, results in many private tenants having to go without food or heating in order to pay the rent. Private rental tenancies can be ended with just two months' notice. The end of a private tenancy is now the main cause of homelessness.

## Getting help before ending up on the street

Under new legislation your local council must help anyone who is homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless. This covers a wide range of circumstances, including people sleeping on friend's sofas, people who have been served an eviction notice, and those fleeing domestic violence. **Anyone who does not have a safe and secure home of their own is eligible for advice from the council.**

The council must help anyone facing eviction to keep their home or find another one. This help begins as soon as an eviction notice is served and continues until a home is secured. If the person becomes homeless the council will help for another eight weeks. **It is important to seek council help as soon as someone is under threat of becoming homeless.**

Only people who are in **priority need** will be offered emergency accommodation if they become homeless, this could be in a Bed & Breakfast or homeless hostel. Priority need is defined as anyone who is particularly vulnerable or has dependants.

Only those with a **local connection and in priority need** will be offered permanent accommodation by the council. Most councils do not have enough housing to offer, so people can end up in emergency accommodation for years, or be offered a home many miles away from their family or support network.

**Many people will only qualify for advice from the council.** Persistence in asking for, understanding, and following up on advice is essential, but very difficult for people facing the stress of homelessness. Offering to help with filling in forms, making phone calls, and attending appointments is an invaluable way of helping someone to find or keep their home.

**Look on your Local Authority website to find out how to contact your council's Housing Officer, and write the contact details on our 'How to Help' A4 poster.**

# Other sources of help

Many people do not qualify for housing from the council, but the council will still give them advice on where to go next depending on their circumstances. People who do not meet immigration and residence conditions will only be given general advice and information. The council must provide a letter giving their reasons for not providing help.

Advice is also available from:

- Shelter Helpline **0808 800 4444**
- The Citizen's Advice Bureau (England) **0344 411 1444**

**There are also organisations that help particular groups of people:**

## 16-25 year olds

- Nightstop UK helps young people into emergency accommodation. Runaway Helpline **116 000** (24-hour)
- The Mix provides advice and help to under-25s **0808 808 4994** (24-hour)

## People escaping domestic violence

- National Domestic Violence Helpline **0808 200 0247** (24-hour)

## Veterans

- The Ministry of Defence's Veterans UK helpline provides assistance on many issues, including housing **0808 191 4218**
- Veterans Aid will assess a person's needs and find appropriate support, including housing **0800 012 6867**

## People with mental health problems

- Mind Infoline **0300 123 3393**
- The Samaritans (UK) **116 123** (24-hour)

## Refugees

- If a refugee needs specific support or advice, visit **Refugeecouncil.org.uk** and search their support directory for your nearest service.

# Helping people who are sleeping rough

Rough sleeping is dangerous and isolating. Within days it affects a person's mental and physical health and exposes them to abuse, violence, crime, and addiction. It is essential to prevent or stop rough sleeping as soon as possible.

If you are concerned about someone you have seen sleeping rough call StreetLink on **0300 500 0914**, contact them on **Streetlink.org.uk**, or download their app of the same name. Be ready to provide as much information about the rough sleeper as you can, including the location of their sleeping site.

**Street homelessness takes people outside of normal society, and it is very difficult to find a way back in.**

Many rough sleepers have been let down or abused by relatives, friends and service providers, so they find it very hard to trust anyone to help them. Their relationships on the street are often based on addiction, or abuse and control, and are not helpful. Some rough sleepers do not want to go into a hostel, as it involves being alongside other people with complex needs in an institution that limits their freedoms and makes demands of them.

However, long-term rough sleepers can turn their lives around spectacularly when they have a reason to do so. For example, people will re-engage with society in order to resolve a health issue, reconnect with estranged children, pursue an interest, or help someone else avoid going through the same situation.

**Coming off the street is a very difficult process, and it is important to put people in contact with local services so that they get the support they need.**

Rough sleepers will probably already be known to local services, who will be pleased to have your help in getting them to engage with the services they provide (although for data protection reasons there is a limit to the information that they will be able to share with you). Your local council is the gateway to local services, as almost all support services require a referral from the council before they can provide help.

# Helping long-term rough sleepers

For those who are unable or unwilling to get off the street, all we can do is keep them as safe and healthy as possible. There are many day centres and night shelters run by local voluntary organisations and churches. Some are drop-in, while some require referrals from the council or other local services.

Identify your local centres and shelters, and call them to find out more about their admission criteria and opening hours. Go to **Homeless.org.uk** and use their 'Find homelessness services in England' search function. Many night shelters only operate in the winter months.

There are also places that distribute food and clothing; information about local provision can be found on **ThePavement.org.uk** under 'Services'.

**Write details of local services down and keep them to hand. You can download our 'How to Help' A4 poster, fill in your local details, and display it in a prominent place. It is also helpful to have directions printed out and ready to give to people.**

## **Don't give money to someone with an addiction**

Many rough sleepers have addictions, and giving them money will feed this addiction. In particular, synthetic psychoactive drugs are cheap and readily available. They are completely destroying thousands of lives, as users become violent, often towards themselves, and may suffer permanent brain damage. Some addicts spend £80-£100 a day on drugs, all gained through street begging.

You may want to keep a stock of chocolate bars, non-perishable food, bottles of water, and new socks and underwear to give out instead.

**It is not illegal to sleep rough, but it is illegal to beg in a public place. Rough sleepers can also be moved on for antisocial behaviour. If someone may be a danger to themselves or others, report them to the police.**

**Contact local police on 101. They welcome further information that will help them to reach and help the individual.**

# Keeping safe

## Don't put yourself or others at risk

Put your own safety above the needs of a homeless caller. An addiction or mental illness can sometimes make a person unintentionally abusive, dishonest, or violent. Assess the risks to people and property, and minimise them; for example, do not leave valuables or keys in sight. Have a plan for what to do in an emergency. Have your mobile phone to hand.

## Develop a personal safety plan

It is a good idea to draw up a **personal safety plan** with the people in your church or community group who may encounter homeless callers, and ensure your safeguarding information is up to date and readily available. Advice on what to include can be found on **Ecclesiastical.com** in the 'For your church' section.

## Be friendly, but wary

If you have time, talk to the individual and listen to their story. However do not let uninvited callers into your home or office. Speak to them in a public place or in sight of other people.

## Protecting vulnerable people

Many homeless people are vulnerable so take care not to put yourself in a situation where you could be accused of abuse. Remember that you are in a position of power and treat them with compassion. It is important to protect other vulnerable people, including children, when helping homeless people.

## Be aware of potential danger

If you are worried about the safety of someone sleeping rough you can call StreetLink on **0300 500 0914**. If the homeless person is in immediate danger, call an ambulance or the police on **999**. Conversely, if you believe that the homeless person may be an imminent threat to you or to others, call the police on 999.

# Being realistic and effective

Showing kindness to a homeless person could help them to turn their life around. However, we shouldn't be naive about the effects of addiction or mental illness, and we need to recognise when it is necessary to involve professionals.

Usually the best way to genuinely help a homeless person is to connect them with local services. They may still need a great deal of support to access these services. However, not everyone will be eligible to access public services.

## Managing expectations and behaviour

Some homeless people will call regularly, particularly if they are treated with kindness. Be honest with them about the limits of your capacity to help. Be clear about behaviour that is not acceptable in and around your church or community centre, for example drinking alcohol, swearing, littering etc.

## Don't tolerate abuse

If someone is abusive or behaving badly, ask them to stop. If they won't stop, or pose an imminent threat, call the police on **999**. Inform local police on **101** of any abuse so that they can monitor rough sleepers who may be a threat to others.

## Providing practical help and services

We encourage churches and other groups to discuss how they can best help homeless people, both collectively and as individuals. As we have outlined in this guide, it is advisable to prepare for homeless callers, be aware of local services and how to access them, draw up a personal safety plan, and agree rules for behaviour and managing expectations.

Churches and groups can also help in proactive and practical ways, either through supporting charities and schemes for homeless people, or through setting up a project for homeless people. Before setting up a project, do talk to other local services to see what would be most useful based on the need in your area. Also consider the impact on local residents.

Guidance on how churches and community groups can set up services to help homeless people is available from **Housingjustice.org.uk**

