

# **Severe Weather (SWEP) and Extended Winter Provision**

## **Engaging rough sleepers in winter**

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The Innovation and Good Practice Team

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# Introduction

There are currently no legal protections for people sleeping rough in England during severe weather – the provision of shelter is not a statutory duty, even when conditions are life threatening. However, there is a humanitarian obligation on local authorities to do all they can to prevent deaths on the streets, and for their partners and the public to support these efforts.

The aim of this guide is to support local authorities and their partner agencies to provide appropriate responses for people sleeping rough throughout the winter months, and especially during severe weather. Deaths in winter are not limited to the effects of cold – severe weather conditions such as high wind, heavy rain and snow all increase the risk of harm. The guidance should also be considered at other times of year e.g. during heatwaves.

Local areas should have adequate provision to prevent rough sleeping at any time of year, however the winter period often presents greatest risks to people's health. It may provide increased opportunities to engage with 'entrenched' rough sleepers and other hard-to-reach groups, as they may be more likely to accept support at this time of year. Therefore this guide has two aims:

- To ensure that no one dies on the streets during severe weather.
- To ensure that every effort is made to engage individuals with support services during the winter months.

This guide will help you to establish whether your local area requires a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) only, or whether you could benefit from more robust Extended Winter Provision. It includes information on issues such as risk, staffing and effective partnership working, to ensure you can write and implement an effective extreme weather protocol.

Homeless Link would like to thank the local authorities and voluntary sector agencies who responded to our survey and shared their learning. To be included in next year's survey please email:

[tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk)

## Key themes from 2016-17

Each year Homeless Link sends a survey to SWEP and cold weather providers to find out what provision has been offered (typically between November and March), and to get feedback on challenges, emerging issues and good practice. The 2016-17 findings are available here: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

118 LAs and providers responded to the 2016-17 survey, and their winter services housed a total of 2,793 people. Key themes included:

- Local Authorities deciding to open for at least 3 nights each time SWEP is triggered, even if temperatures rise, to give enough time to offer support and make a move on plan
- Increased use of flexible SWEP triggers e.g. temperatures above freezing, storms, rain
- Working constructively with risk and vulnerability – responding case-by-case instead of applying blanket policies
- Finding ways to provide inclusive forms of shelter, including couples, dog owners and complex needs
- Difficulties covering the costs and logistics where SWEP is in one location but people in need of shelter are based in dispersed sites, especially for rural areas

## What is severe weather?

There is no single definition of severe weather – any conditions that increase the risk of harm to people sleeping rough can be classed as severe. This includes extreme cold, wind, snow and rain. Local Authorities should not presume when, or in what form, severe weather will occur, and should be prepared each year to escalate responses as and when required.

Bear in mind that many people sleeping rough will already have health issues caused or made worse by homelessness. They may also experience added complications due to drugs, alcohol or medication. It should not be assumed that people sleeping rough have somehow become resilient to severe weather – if anything, the risk of harm and death from exposure is higher for people sleeping on the streets.

**Cold:** extreme cold can cause serious health problems and death for those who are exposed overnight or for long periods of time. Historically, SWEP provision has been triggered when the temperature is forecast at zero degrees or below for three days. However, a common sense approach should be taken – an occasional forecast above zero in a series of sub-zero nights or the impact of rain, snow and wind chill should be taken into account. There are also benefits to opening provision for temperatures that are above freezing but can be just as harmful, and for maintaining this provision over longer periods. These benefits are discussed throughout the guidance.

**Wind:** high winds can lead to an increased risk of injury through uprooted trees, falling walls, dislodged pieces of roofing and other debris. Local authorities should consider the location of local rough sleeping sites and the potential for harm from gale-force winds. This is a particular issue for rural areas where people are, for example, sleeping in tents.

**Rain:** heavy or sudden prolonged rain can lead to flooding and landslides. People sleeping under bridges, on river banks or near the sea, streams or canals may be particularly at risk, but there may be less obvious flood risks, for example drains or gullies. As well as increased risk of drowning, being stuck in the rain, and in wet clothes afterwards, can lead to a range of health problems including trench-foot. There is also an increased risk of losing important belongings such as identification.

**Unsafe shelter:** in addition to the direct risk associated with severe weather, the actions people might take to get out of severe weather can also increase the risk of harm and death. People might find cover in unsafe e.g. large lidded bins, which can result in crush injuries or death if the bin is emptied. They might enter buildings or property illegally, including derelict structures, with associated risks around fire safety and building collapse. People may also increase their substance use as a coping mechanism during bad weather. Attempting to keep safe and dry in bad weather increases the risk of death and injury to people without shelter.

## Options available

This table aims to help Local Authorities decide on the best response to support people who are sleeping rough during winter months and severe weather. The more flexible and responsive you are to individual needs, the better your chance of supporting people off the streets for good.

Options	When and who	Who the service is most appropriate for	Advantages	Possible barriers
<b>Severe Weather Emergency Protocol</b>	<p>Forecast of zero degrees or below, or other severe weather conditions forecast</p> <p>Provided by Local Authorities, often in partnership with existing voluntary sector services</p> <p>Funded by the Local Authority</p>	<p>Long term / 'entrenched' rough sleepers who usually refuse all offers of housing and support</p> <p>People with no recourse to public funds, or who are not usually eligible for services</p>	<p>Prevents deaths on the street</p> <p>Opportunity to engage with people who have declined services/support</p> <p>Can be an extension of existing services and, therefore, low cost</p>	<p>Responsive to temperature fluctuations, so logistical issues as services open and close</p> <p>Can mean a rushed and less effective response</p> <p>Little time to provide long term solutions</p>
<b>Severe Weather Emergency Protocol</b> and <b>Extended Winter Provision</b>	<p>For an extended winter period not dictated by temperature</p> <p>Local Authorities and voluntary sector partnerships, faith-based/community groups</p> <p>Extended provision is often independent of Local Authority funding</p>	<p>Long term / 'entrenched' rough sleepers who usually refuse all offers of housing and support</p> <p>People with no recourse to public funds, or who are not usually eligible for services</p> <p>People new to the streets who want support to end their homelessness</p>	<p>Prevents deaths on the street</p> <p>Allows longer-term engagement to provide sustainable move-on</p> <p>More stable for staff, volunteers and people using the service</p> <p>Capitalises on any increased desire to engage from rough sleepers during cold weather</p>	<p>Requires more staffing, volunteers and funding</p> <p>It might create an increase in demand e.g. as an alternative to sofa surfing</p> <p>There may be community objections, depending on location and numbers</p>

## Severe Weather Emergency Protocols: preventing death

Every Local Authority should have a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which is instigated when severe weather is forecast. We recommend that each area agrees a flexible process for triggering and coordinating SWEP, based on empathy for people sleeping rough in severe weather, rather than sticking to a fixed approach. The protocol should be implemented (i.e. accommodation made available) on the first night of the forecast.

Historically, the minimum SWEP response from Local Authorities has been opening provision when there was a forecast of a drop to zero degrees, or below zero, for three consecutive nights. The three-night guideline was an attempt to define 'severe weather', but we recommend that a common sense approach is taken – near-freezing temperatures or the impact of rain, snow and wind chill should also be considered (see above).

Local Authorities where rough sleeping is not always an issue or where numbers are very low are still responsible for SWEP. An adequate policy will ensure that your Local Authority can provide suitable accommodation quickly to prevent harm and death due to severe weather conditions should the need arise. This could be through delivering SWEP in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

### Developing and implementing SWEP

SWEP should be planned by each Local Authority in partnership with voluntary/faith/community partners, utilising homelessness grants and Local Authority funds, to ensure that a humanitarian response is provided. LAs should review and amend their SWEP in consultation with partner agencies after each winter.

If you require any assistance in writing a SWEP protocol please contact Tasmin Maitland at Homeless Link: [tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk).

The Local Authority should allocate responsibility to one of its teams for monitoring the weather forecast (agree to use a single forecast e.g. Met Office), activating SWEP and ensuring suitable provision is available. A rough sleeping or homelessness coordinator is the most likely person to take the lead on implementing SWEP. The SWEP should be agreed by the end of September to ensure that partners are prepared.

### Humanitarian response

Please note that SWEP should be used to prevent death at all times, not only when a fixed temperature threshold is reached. Local Authorities should consider factors such as wind chill, snow coverage and duration of extreme weather when looking at provision. The protocol aims to prevent deaths on the streets so, if this means increasing the number of beds and opening for longer, the Local Authority should do everything it can to facilitate SWEP and prevent harm. Read good practice case studies here: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

### Who can access SWEP?

SWEP operates outside usual eligibility and entitlement frameworks that govern access to housing. It should be accessible to everyone, including all those who may otherwise be excluded from services: people with no recourse to public funds, people who may have previously been banned, and those with no local connection.

Targeting individuals should be on the basis of need, not housing entitlement. Where possible, Local Authorities should work closely with outreach teams, day centres or other agencies supporting people who are homeless, to identify and target people known to be sleeping rough (e.g. as opposed to sofa surfing, where support is needed but there is not an immediate risk of harm).

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Verification can be a useful way of ensuring that people who are most in need are prioritised for shelter, however a flexible approach should be adopted. Individuals should not be sent back onto the streets to wait for verification. Bear in mind that people often have good reasons for concealing their sleep sites, for example due to vulnerability to assault or fears of enforcement, therefore verification of rough sleeping should not be used as a barrier to SWEP.

## Extended Winter Provision: longer term solutions

Many organisations open emergency access accommodation independently throughout the winter period. These often operate continuously between November and March (although it should be remembered that severe weather can arise outside this period) and are commonly run by faith-based groups opening church halls and community centres on a rotation model. Some Local Authorities also directly commission, or work in partnership with voluntary agencies to provide extended winter provision. A collaborative approach is essential to ensure that people receive a consistent message and that services are not duplicated.

Housing Justice provides a quality mark for church and community shelters – for further information see: [www.housingjustice.org.uk/housing-justice-quality-mark](http://www.housingjustice.org.uk/housing-justice-quality-mark)

## Good practice in SWEP and extended winter provision

### Communication

Simple and effective communication is essential. The public should be made aware of StreetLink, a telephone line and website available across England which enables the public to alert local authorities about rough sleepers in their area. Referrals can be made by visiting [www.streetlink.org.uk](http://www.streetlink.org.uk). You could also advertise a local telephone number and a statement along the lines of: “No-one needs to sleep rough - [insert Local Authority name] will ensure everyone has access to shelter. If you are concerned call this number.” This is easier to disseminate than details of different arrangements. Use local newspapers, social media and email networks to communicate clearly with as many people as possible.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

Many authorities and voluntary agencies delivering winter provision employ a designated Coordinator. This person acts as a single port of call for partner agencies and other interested parties and can reduce cases of confusion/miscommunication.

Good practice examples:

- Frontline staff being better informed of what SWEP is and when it opens
- Regular communication with partner agencies before and during SWEP which improved risk management process and allowed for discussion around trends, issues and improvements to be made
- Using existing multi-agency meetings to plan and discuss the use of SWEP
- Ensuring those who came into contact with rough sleepers (especially out of office hours) were made aware of provision
- Partnership working between local authority housing teams, outreach services and day centre – identifying those likely to need provision, coordinated approach to informing stakeholders when provision would be open and how to direct refer those who required it
- Developing a relationship with management and staff of a private hostel, including H&S and quality work

### Coordinated responses

Good practice in delivering SWEP and extended winter provision requires cooperation and partnership working across agencies both within the borough and more widely e.g. while reconnection to areas where individuals have a local connection may present better opportunities for move-on, individuals should not be reconnected to an area that is not operating SWEP until a housing solution is confirmed. Local Authority Housing Options/homelessness services should usually take a lead in coordinating SWEP, but voluntary sector providers, outreach services, police, health services, food banks, neighbouring councils, No Second Night Out, faith groups and mental health services should all be involved.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

Some Local Authorities provided joint SWEP provision and joint commissioning of outreach teams with neighbouring boroughs.

Good practice examples:

- Working sub-regionally to deliver SWEP
- Working with registered providers to find accommodation for those accepting SWEP
- Planning SWEP early in multi-agency meetings
- One Local Authority worked with Police who identified customers and called through to the outreach team, creating a much closer working relationship
- Keeping up to date with those individuals sleeping rough and monitoring temperatures to ensure provision could be implemented quickly when SWEP activated
- All agencies involved with rough sleepers communicated on a day-to-day basis in order to coordinate SWEP so that nobody sleeping rough was denied access to the provision. This included daily emails and telephone calls updating agencies on who would be accessing SWEP and at which location.

Act swiftly to concentrate efforts for those most at risk in severe weather – avoid lengthy referral procedures. One way to ensure responses are effective and targeted is to set up a Task and Targeting group in advance of opening severe weather provision. This group should seek to identify individuals at risk and decide on the best approach and procedures between services. A protocol should be agreed by all agencies involved. Please see the good practice guidance at: [www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit) for more information.

Where No Second Night Out (NSNO) is in operation, this should be the first point of call for all eligible individuals. Anyone not eligible for NSNO should be offered assistance through SWEP/extended winter provision. If NSNO is at full capacity or individuals reject NSNO assistance they should still be offered shelter under SWEP. The service providing SWEP should reinforce the NSNO offer and encourage individuals to accept support.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

One NSNO provider had representatives based at the local SWEP service to take referrals when it was open.

Good practice examples:

- Quickly linking an individual identified under NSNO protocol to the NSNO service
- Continued use of NSNO throughout the year to decrease the numbers of individuals on the street who may otherwise require SWEP

### Recording, monitoring and sharing data

Capturing the demographic and support needs of individuals accessing SWEP and extended winter provision will allow Local Authorities and providers to plan effectively for future responses. Recording information can be tricky in chaotic environments, but is necessary to demonstrate the work that services are doing. Sharing information between services can save time and resources. The more information that can be collected about clients' needs, the more effective future provision can be. As a minimum, services should collect information on:

- Names, contact numbers and emails (where available)
- Demographic data: gender, date of birth, nationality, ethnicity
- Primary support needs
- Length of time sleeping rough
- Previous contact with services
- Where clients move on to when they leave e.g. return to the streets, positive move on etc

Use of B&B accommodation can create additional difficulties when trying to monitor clients' move-on, if there is no other support around the placement. Look for ways to measure outcomes, for example could B&B staff ask someone where they will go after SWEP, or can you arrange to meet/speak to the person as SWEP ends, and discuss what further support they might need?

Ideally there will be regular contact from the SWEP Coordinator to engage individuals, including those placed in B&B, in order to find positive move on and to ensure individuals don't 'fall between the gaps'. There has been at least one instance of an emergency B&B placement where the person was later found dead in their room. Coordinators must ensure that nobody is placed and then forgotten, and that there are procedures for closing SWEP cases and recording outcomes. Accountability for checking welfare and move on should rest with a named person or team, if not with the Coordinator themselves.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- Revised referral/assessment procedures, often in conjunction with earlier opening times, meant that some providers were able to complete comprehensive risk assessments and offer more targeted support
- Using Homeless Link's template monitoring form and monitoring and evaluation tool, which enabled comprehensive data collection.
- Outreach team identify the most vulnerable individuals and complete paperwork before SWEP activated.
- Implementing a referral protocol for offering bed spaces

We have produced a template monitoring form and monitoring tool that can help you collect and record information effectively. These are available at [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep).

You may also want to consider using an information sharing agreement – a template can be found in our Task and Targeting guidance available here: [www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit)

For more information on effectively capturing and using data, please visit:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/demonstrating-your-impact/collecting-data](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/demonstrating-your-impact/collecting-data)

### Accommodation types

Whether providing SWEP or extended winter provision, agencies should make the most of existing resources, for example using day centres and communal rooms in hostels, day services and community resources.

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Mattresses on floors, armchairs and camp beds are not ideal, but can be used as emergency accommodation in this instance.

B&Bs can be expensive and offer inadequate opportunities for engagement, move-on and monitoring, and should typically be avoided if other options exist. They do, however, present a flexible solution for rural areas and smaller authorities with low numbers of people sleeping rough. B&B provision is sometimes favoured by people who do not want to engage with services (i.e. those described as 'hard to reach'). Try to be responsive to individual needs and offer as wide a range of accommodation options as possible.

When planning SWEP and/or winter provision, agencies should check that they have suitable accommodation for different groups e.g. women, couples, young people, and people with dogs. In any type of provision, support should be provided to assist people to meet their needs and achieve positive move-on if possible.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- One housing association invested heavily in providing high quality SWEP accommodation. This was designed with the comfort and well-being of service users in mind and included new beds, high quality smoking shelters, dog kennels and free access to veterinary care.
- One authority had built strong relationships with B&B owners and trained B&B staff in working with the client group. B&B staff were committed to providing a safe and welcoming environment for service users, such as putting on Christmas entertainment and dinner.
- We find that our permanent residents are very positive about us providing SWEP, despite the fact that it inconveniences them by closing off one of the hostel's communal areas.
- One service used a guest house, which enabled evening support for their clients who were working, and found it was a more positive environment than a shelter, in particular for more vulnerable people, increasing dignity, choice and normality.
- One Local Authority switched from B&B provision to combining SWEP provision with outreach and NSNO contracts in one building. This reduced the number of people returning to the streets after SWEP.
- Providing different venues meant that clients could be housed separately if incidents were likely.
- Providing women-only SWEP when numbers of females on the street were known to have risen.
- One Local Authority used crash pads for out of hours placements, as well as converting two one-bed flats located within temporary accommodation units into 5 sleeping spaces per flat during SWEP.
- Working with a neighbouring local authority to have access to communal areas in their supported housing projects.

### Rural areas

In rural areas, or areas with no history of rough sleeping, it may appear that there is little need to devise SWEP. However, SWEP is also about being prepared for a change in circumstances. Small or isolated Local Authorities should either work with neighbouring councils to devise cross-authority solutions, or provide solutions themselves in partnership with voluntary, faith or community partners. It should not be policy simply to refer people to larger areas, when provision could be made available locally, close to people's social networks and services e.g. GPs. This may mean accessing spaces that are not traditionally used. Rural authorities have previously used guest houses, pubs and church halls to house rough sleepers in extreme weather.

### Funding and resources

SWEP and Extended Winter Provision should, as far as possible, be paid for from the existing homelessness grant or other Local Authority funds. Some services have managed to claim Housing Benefit for individuals using SWEP/winter provision (see note below). If Housing Benefit is agreed, agencies should work closely with the Housing Benefit team to ensure that applications are processed quickly and delays do not prevent access to beds.

Using a diverse range of funding streams can often leave a service more resilient to the threat of cuts, and Local Authority funding is often supplemented by voluntary donations and organisational funding streams. Services can also appeal to businesses/members of the public for 'in kind' donations. These resources can be maximised by advertising for specific items that are needed such as toiletries, food and travel vouchers. It is important to start putting plans in place for funding early, well before the winter period and often as soon as the previous year's services have closed.

Please note: Housing Benefit is sometimes used as a means of funding some SWEP/winter provision. Following a tribunal decision in 2013, there was some concern as to whether HB could pay for these services. However, a joint clarification note from DWP and DCLG seemed to resolve this situation. This confirms, just as prior to the Tribunal ruling, shelters can be HB eligible so long as they conform to the HB Regulations for eligibility: [www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2013/jun/27/nightshelter-update-law-hasn%E2%80%99t-changed](http://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2013/jun/27/nightshelter-update-law-hasn%E2%80%99t-changed). However, any services still using Housing Benefit will need to review their funding mechanism in advance of the Universal Credit roll-out.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- One authority negotiated with local public transport providers who agreed to accept travel tokens from SWEP clients.
- Several services used successful social media campaigns to increase donations from members of the community.
- Reducing the cost of B&Bs by using communal areas in supported housing projects and hostels
- Use of small charity hardship grants and legacy funding
- Paying for two emergency bed spaces all year around in a private hostel took pressure off the caseworker, could be used when all commissioned services were full

### Staffing and volunteers

Services need committed and trained teams who are able to work flexibly and have a good knowledge of the homelessness sector. A combination of paid staff and volunteers often works best.

- Professional boundary training is essential for volunteers. Training should also cover areas such as effective communication and challenging behaviour, risk assessment, mental health, and drug and alcohol use.
- Try to utilise volunteers' skills appropriately and offer a range of tasks according to levels of experience and skills. Tasks for less experienced/skilled volunteers could include cooking, cleaning, sorting out bedding, providing social and well-being activities.
- If volunteers are to carry out any one-to-one support they should have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check – for more information see: [www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview](http://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview) – this typically requires a longer lead-in time, but DBS checks won't be necessary for every volunteer.

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- Schemes such as befriending and mentoring programmes can allow routes for ex-service users to volunteer with structure and support.
- You may need to recruit staff/volunteers who speak relevant languages, depending on your local context.
- Volunteers should not be put at risk. A clear induction, supervision and support pathway should be put in place so that they can raise concerns and develop their skills effectively.

For more information on supporting volunteers please see:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/practical-guidance-on-managing-volunteers-in-homelessness-services](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/practical-guidance-on-managing-volunteers-in-homelessness-services)

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- Several services recruited client volunteers from nearby hostels who had personal experience of rough sleeping. This proved invaluable in engaging with some of the most hard-to-reach individuals.
- One service improved their application procedure for volunteers this year, which included completion of full DBS check, interviews and a comprehensive training programme.
- All volunteers were recruited in advance of the service opening and given 3 days training covering practical considerations about running a shelter, as well as information on health and safety and maintaining professional boundaries.
- Ensuring a staff rota was in place during winter to ensure SWEP could always be covered when activated
- A district council ran a volunteer recruitment campaign: 30 volunteers were recruited, trained, supported and placed by the council
- Providing training to all shelter managers and at least one volunteer from each shelter
- Asking some shelter guests to participate in the running of the shelter
- Working in a community partnership to increase involvement from volunteers and access to other venues
- Volunteers used to support signing in at access
- One provider remarked on the enthusiasm and compassion from the volunteers, saying their experiences completely changed some of their perceptions and attitudes, and the volunteers became ambassadors for the project and the issues facing homeless people.

### Engaging people in support

Most of the individuals accessing SWEP/winter provision will have additional support needs as well as their immediate need for shelter. Accommodation should be linked to support, either on-site or via a partner agency. Many shelters partner with day centre services so that people have somewhere to go in the mornings where they can get help to exit homelessness.

Supporting might include access to move-on accommodation, healthcare, education, employment, substance use services, benefits advice and creative/leisure activities. SWEP/winter provision often provides an opportunity to engage individuals who have been reluctant to accept support in the past, or people who are new to the streets, where a connection with services can avoid their situation getting worse. Support should be provided by experienced staff with a range of flexible options offered.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- One authority using B&B accommodation provided free transport to collect service users in the mornings and take them to a local day centre to access support.
- One service introduced a Breakfast Club, allowing people to stay longer in the mornings and supplying a hot breakfast. This provided an opportunity to engage people and improved move-on outcomes.
- Employing staff and volunteers who could speak the same languages as their clients led to increased engagement with support in some services.
- Using the NSNO coordinator to engage with people during SWEP
- Meeting held with SWEP provider in advance to discuss and agree move on plans for any individual placed under SWEP
- Co-ordinated approach and partnership between the Council, rough sleeper outreach team, voluntary organisation, the community Matron and the supported accommodation provider

While individuals should always be encouraged to accept the support that is provided, this should not be a condition of accessing the provision. Some people may not feel ready to accept support, and this should be respected. The priority is to reduce the risk of immediate harm in severe weather.

### People refusing shelter

Services often report difficulties in persuading some people to access accommodation. Outreach or other teams should be having regular conversations with these people to understand their reasons for refusal. Share information about the health risks associated with severe weather, and highlight the increased risk for people using substances and for those whose health is already compromised.

If someone continues to refuse help in these circumstances, it may be grounds to contact mental health services. Understanding the Mental Capacity Act (MCA), and working closely and persistently with mental health services, may be the right route to safeguard vulnerable people during severe weather. For more information on working with mental health services please see our website:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit)  
[www.homeless.org.uk/working-with-mental-health-services](http://www.homeless.org.uk/working-with-mental-health-services)

### Concerned that someone does not have capacity?

If you are concerned that a person does not have capacity to make the decision to accept SWEP in cold weather, the Mental Capacity Act may apply. The Mental Health Service Interventions toolkit found at the bottom of this page: [www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit) was designed to provide information about legislation, and step-by-step forms which can be completed to establish whether intervention can take place. It may be appropriate to use the MCA to frame the case for a Mental Health Act assessment or for emergency services to take the person to hospital if at risk (including if physically unwell or intoxicated).

Working with the Police can be helpful to assess risk where people are staying out in severe weather, especially in areas without an outreach team. Police can also play a key role in promoting SWEP to target people most in need.

### **Effective response and example of good practice:**

Several districts provided continued monitoring and support to rough sleepers who refused to accept shelter. Outreach teams made frequent visits with provisions and information about services. Individuals were always encouraged to access SWEP facilities even if they chose not to sleep in the shelter.

Again, it is important to be flexible and offer a range of accommodation options if possible. Certain individuals or groups may not feel comfortable sharing communal floor space, and alternatives should be made available wherever possible e.g. a separate room for women or young people. Information about all aspects of the provision e.g. rules, opening times, availability of food should be fully explained to individuals at the referral and booking in stages. This will hopefully avoid instances of 'no shows' or of abandonments, which can mean that beds are left empty when other people have been turned away.

### **Logistical considerations**

Project logistics, such as when services will open and close, when people can be booked in and how people can be referred, need to be planned well in advance of the winter months. Clear procedures, written in plain English, should be put in place and communicated effectively to staff, volunteers, partner organisations and potential service users. A disorganised or inconsistent service increases risk, as staff are more likely to have to turn people away, and there may be frustrations for both staff and people using the service that can be avoided by better planning and communication.

Open services late afternoon/early evening to provide more time for booking in, risk assessment and support work. If possible, complete booking in processes with people earlier in the day e.g. at a day centre, to reduce delays and frustrations night. Later check-out times, with links/transport to day services, increase your opportunities to engage service users in support.

While policies and procedures should be in place, try to be flexible – it is often hard for people sleeping on the streets to follow procedures, especially if it means travelling to appointments at fixed times. Staff should make decisions based on assessment of need and risk, with prevention of harm as a priority. We have created a planning checklist to remind agencies of the areas they need to consider when planning their service:

[www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

### **Effective responses and examples of good practice:**

- One service introduced a lunchtime booking-in slot. This allowed staff to fully assess and explain the service in a more relaxed and less chaotic environment.
- One service reported staying open until a Monday despite being programmed to close on a Sunday. This allowed better coordination with other support services operating during the week.
- Local Authority funded travel to rural areas from the local city to encourage customer to take up the provision.
- One Local Authority's out of hours contractor arranged accommodation for rough sleepers when SWEP was active, without the need to call the Housing Options Team.
- Having a central referral 'hub' at a day centre using additional staff from the local authority and other agencies. Clients could be referred or self-refer.

### **Managing risk and challenging behaviour**

The wide eligibility criteria for SWEP/winter provision can increase risk across a number of areas, including: large shared spaces, unfamiliar facilities, people who are banned from services, people that you have little information about, or who are reluctant to engage

Brief individual safety plans should be completed, with the aim of identifying and managing risk, rather than as a basis for exclusion. Assessment should ask clients about violence, harm to self or others, drug and alcohol use, housing history and history with other services. Also ask people about ways to help them manage/avoid risky behaviour and what might help them to stay safe and able to use the service appropriately.

Evidence should be requested from agencies that have worked with the individual previously. Developing a working relationship with Police can mean that checks are done quickly. If high risk is identified, this should not be seen as a reason for exclusion, but as an opportunity to put measures in place to make the space as safe as possible. Staff skills and training can make a big difference in how a service manages risk, for example skills around boundaries, communication and trauma-informed approaches.

Think about escalating responses in your safety plans – ask the person what steps can reduce the risk, how staff/volunteers can help them to engage within the rules of the project, and discuss what will happen next if the situation becomes unsafe for them/others. Speak to Police about notifying them of incidents and exclusions, as they may be able to check on someone's welfare. Any decision to ask someone to leave during severe weather should be made carefully and reviewed at the earliest opportunity.

Health and safety regulations around buildings and staffing should operate in line with standard procedures. Policies around controlled substances, alcohol use, working with vulnerable adults and offenders should be in place and adhered to. Alcohol and substance misuse can be a key area of concern for services operating during severe weather and, while it should not be a barrier to support, suitable agencies with the experience and resources to deal with such risks should be involved in the delivery of the service.

Bear in mind that people who are alcohol dependent are at risk of alcohol withdrawal seizures, which can be fatal. Some services allow drinking, while others have developed policies to allow controlled drinking in a designated part of the shelter so that people don't have to make a decision between the risk of severe weather and the risk of alcohol withdrawal.

### **Effective responses and examples of good practice:**

- One service described the positive impact of a more rigorous implementation of rules regarding intoxication. Each client was fully informed of the rules at referral and asked to sign to confirm that they understood them before booking in. This led to a large reduction in incidents.
- Ongoing partnership working and gathering risk information in advance from agencies such as probation
- Speaking to each client individually to ensure rules are understood on access to SWEP each night
- Use of a local hotel for two high risk individuals who could not be placed in a communal lounge area.
- In one case a transgender customer was deemed too high risk to be placed in the communal areas available so a local charity agreed to pay for hotel

## Homeless Link

Services can reduce the risk of challenging behaviour by creating a pleasant, comfortable and safe environment. Offering food, activities and entertainment, as well as training staff and volunteers to be welcoming and non-judgemental, can help people relax, interact positively with others and reduce feelings of unease that increase the likelihood of incidents of aggression.

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- One provider described the efforts they made to help people feel comfortable and safe – the referral agency accompanied each person to the accommodation, gave a tour, induction and help to settle in.

### Insurance

Always check that your insurance policy covers the activity in the space you are using. Most organisations providing severe weather interventions already work with people sleeping rough, so existing insurance is likely to provide adequate cover. Unless there is change of use with regards to a building or space, changing your policy may not be necessary. If you are using a church or a town hall you may need to check what, if any, restrictions your policy has. While rare, serious incidents can happen in temporary provision, so make sure you are adequately covered. Most companies can insure spaces relatively quickly, so this need not be a barrier to offering support.

### Move on

Identify routes out of emergency provision into hostels, private rented, social housing, and specialist accommodation so that people do not have to return to the streets. As well as saving lives, SWEP and extended winter provision can support people off the streets.

Local Authorities should be working with providers to remove barriers to move-on. Consider options for people who might struggle to find accommodation otherwise e.g. those assessed as having a high level of risk and/or vulnerability; those with no recourse to public funds; couples; or those with pets that they will not live without. Partnerships between support agencies, outreach teams and Local Authorities can facilitate getting clients into stable accommodation – LAs with low levels of provision should look at options for spot purchasing or joint commissioning. SWEP and Extended Winter Provision can reduce or end rough sleeping – it is an emergency response with the potential to achieve much more.

Reconnection can offer sustainable solutions for some UK and other EU nationals, if they aren't eligible to access services locally:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/assessment-and-reconnections-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/assessment-and-reconnections-toolkit)

[www.routeshome.org.uk/](http://www.routeshome.org.uk/)

For more information about working with people who have no recourse to public funds (including asylum seekers) please see our guidance here:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/supporting-people-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/supporting-people-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds)

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- One authority made a commitment to finding move-on accommodation for all service users before asking them to leave their SWEP provision. Provision was kept open until all placements had been made.
- One hostel allowed SWEP clients to access its pre-tenancy training course. Working with partners to find rent deposits for hostel residents meant that hostel spaces were freed up for severe weather clients.

## Homeless Link

- The use of starter tenancies and assistance via various bond schemes allowed the majority of SWEP clients in one district to move on to suitable accommodation.
- Using staff dedicated to assessing and supporting people to move on
- Using a move on project to refer people quickly from SWEP allowed for emergency accommodation to be available more frequently
- Provision was extended to allow for individuals to be assessed and supported for move on
- Agreements around sharing need and risk assessments enabled a quick transfer from SWEP to permanent housing

### Health services

People can become very unwell when sleeping rough in low temperatures. Providers should seek to involve health services so that people who need treatment are identified and linked with the appropriate service. Risk assessments and safety planning should consider the spread of infectious diseases, and relevant medical or public health advice sought to manage any concerns.

Linking with local GPs or drop-in clinics at day centres will help you to offer people ways to manage their health. People can be referred to GPs as temporary patients, although advocacy from providers may be required to ensure this happens. See our guidance for day centres on preparing for winter:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/national-projects/day-centres-project/resources-for-day-centres](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/national-projects/day-centres-project/resources-for-day-centres)

### Effective responses and examples of good practice:

- Several services arranged for health professionals such as GPs, nurses, dentists and podiatrists to be present on site. This allowed interventions that individuals would not otherwise have accessed, and led to positive health outcomes.



## **What we do**

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless in England. We work to make services better and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

## **Let's end homelessness together**

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