

# Severe Weather (SWEP) and Extended Winter Provision

## Engaging rough sleepers in winter

**Let's end homelessness together**

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## Produced by

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 during severe weather, and especially in winter months. Deaths on the streets are not limited to the effects of cold – severe weather conditions such as high wind, heavy rain, snow and heatwaves all increase the risk of harm.

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 also provide increased opportunities to engage with 'entrenched' rough sleepers and other so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups, who 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 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. If you are a provider and want to be included in next year's survey, please email: [tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk)

## Key themes from 2018-19

Each year Homeless Link sends a survey to SWEP and cold weather providers about the previous winter (roughly November to March) to get feedback on provision, challenges, emerging issues and good practice. The 2018-19 report is available here: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep).

Themes from this year build on emerging practice seen in previous years:

- Increasing numbers of local authorities using flexible opening triggers for SWEP (rather than waiting for extended periods below freezing)
- Additional funding sources for cold weather and extended winter provision, namely Rough Sleeping Initiative funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
- Increase in local authorities using SWEP as an access point for provision of shelter until a more stable offer can be made (i.e. not expecting people to return to the streets once the weather improves)

However, despite positive trends, 1,324 individuals from this year's sample returned to the streets after accessing shelter, while outcomes were unknown for another 2,858 people.

## 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, rain and heat. 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, pain 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, as their health may already be suffering.<sup>1</sup>

**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 was triggered when the forecast was zero degrees or below for three days. It is now best practice to take a common sense approach, where any forecast approaching zero is considered; the impact of rain, snow and wind chill are taken into account; and the ‘feels like’ temperature is checked, along with conditions underfoot (e.g. ice). There are 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. Standing water, puddles and flooding may continue to be a risk after rainfall has stopped. As well as increased risk of drowning, being stuck in the rain and unable to change out of wet clothes/shoes afterwards can lead to a range of health problems, including trench-foot. There is also an increased risk of loss or damage to belongings such as identification documents.

**Heatwaves:** people sleeping rough may find it difficult to source drinking water and sun protection, increasing risks around dehydration, sunburn and sunstroke. Needs are likely be more urgent during daylight hours, so a different approach to SWEP may be appropriate e.g. free water and sunscreen, cool daytime spaces, and links to healthcare. For case studies of summer SWEP during the 2018 heatwave see: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

**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 places e.g. large lidded bins, which can result in crush injuries or death if the bin is emptied. They might enter buildings or property without permission, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://groundswell.org.uk/what-we-do/peer-research/out-of-pain/>

## Severe Weather Emergency Protocols: preventing death

Every Local Authority should have a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which is used 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 was to open provision when there was a forecast of zero degrees, or below zero, for three consecutive nights. The three-night guideline was an attempt to define 'severe weather', but a common sense approach is now widely adopted as standard practice, where SWEP triggers take into account weather warnings, near-freezing temperatures, rain, snow, wind chill, gales or heat.

Local Authorities where rough sleeping is not always an issue or where numbers are very low are still responsible for arranging a SWEP response. 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'd like support to develop a SWEP protocol, please contact: [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. Winter SWEP plans 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. See the 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, police/community safety 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).

## Homeless Link

Verification (confirming that someone has been seen sleeping rough) is sometimes used to ensure that people who are most in need are prioritised for shelter, however a flexible approach should be adopted. People should not be sent back onto the streets to wait for verification. Bear in mind that individuals often have good reasons for concealing their sleep sites, for example due to vulnerability to assault or fears of enforcement, and so 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 and are commonly run by community or faith-based groups making extensive use of volunteers. Some Local Authorities also directly commission or work in partnership with voluntary agencies to provide extended winter provision.

The presence of night shelters does not remove the need for statutory SWEP provision, however these can be combined. A collaborative approach is essential to ensure that services are not duplicated and that beds are not being held at multiple sites for the same person, and that enough beds are available to meet demand.

In some locations, the Local Authority funds SWEP beds within an existing shelter service. However, due to the reliance on volunteers and many shelters using a single communal space, night shelter rules may be stricter than other accommodation services e.g. requiring abstinence, using curfews, not letting people go in and out to smoke during the night. This means that alternative SWEP provision (e.g. spot purchasing B&B rooms or opening communal space in a hostel) should be sourced to meet the needs of anyone sleeping rough who might struggle to meet the requirements of a shelter stay.

People from marginalised groups might not feel safe to access generic night shelter services. For example, The Outside Project make the case for LGBTIQ+ night shelter provision: <http://lgbtiqoutside.org/the-project/>. Local Authorities and providers should review whether their service meets the needs of people sleeping rough, and seek feedback from those who don't come into the shelter – speak to outreach teams, soup runs, street pastors and, most importantly, people sleeping rough to understand any reasons why they're not accepting an offer of shelter.

Co-locating support such as GPs, JobCentre or Housing Options staff at the night shelter, as well as planning day centre services to open as the night shelter closes, makes best use of shelter provision to help people find routes off the street.

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)

## Emergency or Extended Provision?

Local Authorities, in consultation with partners, need to identify the best way to offer support 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. An additional SWEP response should always be planned in case of exceptional weather so that you have beds for each person in need.

Options	When and who	Who is it designed for?	Advantages	Possible challenges
<b>Severe Weather Emergency Protocol</b>	<p>Severe weather conditions forecast e.g. temperature falling towards zero degrees or lower.</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 rough sleepers who usually refuse all offers of housing and support.</p> <p>People excluded from other provision.</p> <p>People with no recourse to public funds, or who are not usually eligible for services.</p> <p>People with no local connection.</p> <p>In areas with no other provision it will be for every person sleeping rough</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>Low threshold – open to anyone who need shelter.</p> <p>Short term funding can increase options available e.g. B&amp;B.</p>	<p>Responding to changes in weather can lead to issues with logistics, comms and support as services open and close at short notice.</p> <p>Can mean a rushed and less effective response.</p> <p>Little time to build trust and provide long term solutions.</p>
<b>Extended Winter Provision incorporating or alongside Severe Weather Emergency Protocol</b>	<p>For an extended winter period not dictated by weather conditions.</p> <p>Local Authorities and voluntary sector partnerships, faith-based/community groups.</p> <p>Extended provision is often partly or fully independent of Local Authority funding.</p>	<p>People sleeping rough who can cope in communal setting.</p> <p>People seeking support to end their homelessness.</p> <p>People hidden homeless, e.g. sofa surfing, when this option is unavailable.</p> <p>Often, some or all of the same groups as SWEP (above).</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 during cold weather, increased chance of move-on.</p>	<p>Requires more staffing, volunteers and funding.</p> <p>Communal settings are hard for some.</p> <p>May be hard to predict demand if people are usually hidden homeless.</p> <p>There may be community objections e.g. for planning permission.</p> <p>Strict rules in some shelters exclude people e.g. no drinking, no dogs.</p>

## Good practice in SWEP and extended winter provision

### Planning and practical steps

#### 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. Mattresses on floors, armchairs and camp beds are not ideal, but can be used as emergency accommodation in this instance. Some hostel and supported housing providers can use void rooms.

B&Bs can be expensive and offer inadequate opportunities for engagement, move-on and monitoring. As a result, they should be avoided if other options exist. B&Bs do, however, offer 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 (e.g. people sometimes described as 'hard to reach' and those who feel unsafe in communal shelters). Try to be responsive to individual needs and offer as wide a range of accommodation options as possible. Maintain contact with people after referral into B&B provision.

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.

There are, increasingly, calls from the public for local authorities to open empty buildings as winter shelter, and a perception that it is sufficient to open a building in order to get people off the streets. Safe spaces are needed and local authorities should look at all available options. However, we advise against opening buildings that lack adequate facilities for washing, cooking, sleeping and storage of belongings; and where there is no support team who can help people to move on from the shelter. Unsupervised open access buildings may result in higher risks e.g. drug use or exploitation of vulnerable people seeking shelter.

#### Examples from practice

- Provide high quality SWEP accommodation, designed with the comfort and well-being of service users in mind e.g. new beds, smoking shelters, dog kennels and free access to veterinary care.
- Strong relationships with B&B owners – train B&B staff in working with the client group in order to provide a safe and welcoming environment for service users.
- Permanent hostel residents can be very positive about SWEP, despite the inconvenience of closing off communal areas.
- Using a guest house, with evening support for working clients, to create a more positive environment than a shelter, increasing dignity, choice and normality.
- Switch from B&B provision to combine SWEP provision with outreach and assessment hub contracts in one building, reducing the number of people returning to the streets after SWEP.
- Provide different venues so that clients can be housed separately if incidents are a risk.
- Provide a women-only SWEP.
- Use crash pads for out of hours' placements.
- Convert 1-bed flats in temporary accommodation into multiple sleeping spaces per flat during SWEP.
- Work with a neighbouring local authority to access communal areas in their supported housing projects.

### 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 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 make 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.

Note on Housing Benefit: 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 confirmed that shelters can be HB eligible as 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, and may want to identify alternative or additional funding mechanisms.

For more on funding sources, see the SWEP report: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

### Examples from practice

- Pool resources with neighbouring authorities to create options tailored to specific cohorts who are less likely to access generic shelters e.g. provision designed for LGBTQ people, women, young people.
- Negotiate with local public transport providers to accept travel tokens from SWEP clients.
- Use social media campaigns to increase donations from members of the community.
- Reduce the cost of B&Bs by using communal areas in supported housing projects and hostels
- Apply for small charity hardship grants and legacy funding
- Pay for emergency bed spaces year-round in a private hostel to use if all commissioned services are full

### Identifying need

Planning for SWEP should be based on current local need, with a plan for unexpected demand/exceptionally severe weather.<sup>2</sup> Use available data sources such as: intelligence from outreach and other partners such as street pastors and park wardens; CHAIN or another local database of people sleeping rough, where available; and StreetLink referrals. Speak to people sleeping rough and seek to co-produce provision, as this is likely to increase take-up and positive outcomes.<sup>3</sup> You will need to know, not only numbers, but also what support needs are likely to present, whether a communal shelter will be suitable, how much provision is needed for couples, dogs etc.

<sup>2</sup> See Westminster Exceptional SWEP case study: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

<sup>3</sup> [www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit)

### 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 be adequate. 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.

### Logistics

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. Feedback from the exceptionally severe weather in 2018 indicated that a single point of contact or coordinating team can play a vital role in making best use of resources and getting people into SWEP quickly and safely.

Consider how people will access SWEP out of hours and where the access point will be located – wherever possible, avoid people having to wait on the street for outreach teams to find them.

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 at night. Later check-out times, with links/transport to day services, increase your opportunities to engage people with support, as well as reducing the risk of disruption to the neighbourhood if groups leave without anywhere to go. Anti-social behaviour could affect planning permission for future provision, so attention should be given to how the service will manage the times when people are entering and exiting the building, and work out how to minimise any negative impact on neighbours.

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 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)

Don't forget the practicalities: catering, bedding, laundry, secure overnight storage of belongings etc.

### Examples from practice

- Introduce a lunchtime booking-in slot, allowing staff to fully assess and explain the service in a more relaxed and less chaotic environment.
- Stay open until a Monday to improve coordination with other support services operating during the week.
- Fund travel between rural and urban areas to encourage take-up of provision at a distance.
- Use an out-of-hours contractor to arrange accommodation for rough sleepers when SWEP is active.
- Set up a central hub e.g. at a day centre, staffed by the local authority and/or other agencies. Clients are referred or self-refer.

### Recording, monitoring and sharing data

Capturing the demographic and support needs of individuals accessing SWEP and extended winter provision helps Local Authorities and providers to plan effectively for the future. Recording information can be tricky in chaotic environments, but sharing information between services can save time and resources.

Local authorities and their partners are each responsible for ensuring they understand and comply with data protection legislation.<sup>4</sup>

Relevant information about clients' needs can help you to identify and respond to support needs; ensure future provision is effective; and monitor whether current provision is serving people equally. Bear in mind that some people might not be willing to disclose much information when they first engage and this shouldn't automatically exclude them from shelter. Keep data collection under review to ensure it is relevant. Where possible, record:

- Names, contact numbers and emails
- Demographic data: gender, age/date of birth, nationality, ethnicity
- Primary support needs
- Length of time sleeping rough
- Previous contact with services, including past use of SWEP/winter shelters
- 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? Ask people about how to keep in touch e.g. phone or email.

Ideally there will be regular contact from the SWEP Coordinator in order to engage people, 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.

### Examples from practice

- Revise referral/assessment procedures, perhaps in conjunction with earlier opening times, so that providers complete comprehensive risk assessments and offer more targeted support
- Use Homeless Link's templates for comprehensive data collection
- Outreach team identifies the most vulnerable individuals, completes paperwork before SWEP is activated
- Implement a referral protocol for offering bed spaces

Template monitoring form and monitoring tool available at: [www.homeless.org.uk/swep](http://www.homeless.org.uk/swep)

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)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/introduction-to-gdpr>

### Communication

Simple and effective communication is essential. If SWEP is going to open, this information needs to be shared quickly and as widely as possible, for example via the website and social media channels of the local authority and partners, through local media and other platforms e.g. digital displays at transport hubs or areas of high footfall. Referral routes should be shared with police, outreach, hostels and other teams/services who may be in touch with people sleeping rough. If it isn't possible to publicise the address of SWEP provision, ensure the referral route/point of contact is publicised (e.g. via Housing Options or a day centre), plus out of hours' arrangements.

Bear in mind that staff from other sectors may need more information to understand what is being offered and who it is intended for, to reduce the risk of inappropriate referrals. Hospitals, police and social service teams should be clear about when and how they could make referrals.

The public should be made aware of StreetLink, which is a website, phone line and app available across England and Wales, enabling 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.' A single referral point is easier to disseminate than details of different arrangements, especially if your SWEP provision is spread across several providers. Use local newspapers, social media and email networks to communicate with as many people as possible.

### Examples from practice

- Many authorities and voluntary agencies delivering winter provision employ a designated Coordinator. They act as a single point of call and can reduce cases of confusion/miscommunication
- Inform frontline staff about what SWEP is, when it opens, and how to refer
- Regular communication with partner agencies before and during SWEP improves risk management and allows for discussion around trends, issues and improvements to be made in real time
- Use existing multi-agency meetings to plan and discuss the use of SWEP
- Ensure those who came into contact with people sleeping rough (especially out of hours) are aware of provision and referral routes
- Flyers with directions of how to access SWEP
- Minibus provided by community/faith group to connect people sleeping rough in city centre with the shelter
- Partnership working between local authority housing teams, outreach services and day centre – identify those likely to need provision, coordinate the approach to informing stakeholders about when provision opens and how to make referrals
- There may be potential to use SWEP placements as an opportunity to develop relationships with private hostels and work on their Health & Safety and quality

### Coordinated responses

Good practice in delivering SWEP and extended winter provision requires cooperation and partnership working across agencies, both within the local authority and more widely. Local Authority housing and homelessness teams will usually take a lead in coordinating SWEP, but voluntary sector providers, outreach services, police, health services, food banks, neighbouring councils, assessment hubs, faith groups and mental health services should all be involved.

### Examples from practice

- Some Local Authorities provide joint SWEP provision and joint commissioning of outreach teams with neighbouring boroughs.
- Plan SWEP early in multi-agency meetings
- Work with registered providers to find accommodation for those accepting SWEP
- Keep up to date with individuals sleeping rough and monitor temperatures to ensure provision is implemented and offered quickly when SWEP activated
- Work sub-regionally to deliver SWEP
- Work with Police who identify customers and call the outreach team, create a closer working relationship
- All agencies involved with rough sleepers communicate on a day-to-day basis in order to coordinate SWEP so that nobody sleeping rough is denied access to the provision. Daily emails and telephone calls updating agencies about who will 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 multi-agency ‘task and targeting’ or ‘by name’ group in advance of opening severe weather provision. This group should seek to identify individuals at risk and agree the best approach between services, which might include making tailored offers based on your knowledge of particular individuals for whom a standard shelter place is less likely to work. A protocol should be agreed by all agencies involved. See: [www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit)

Where an assessment hub is in operation, this should be the first point of call for all eligible individuals. Anyone not eligible for the hub should be offered assistance through SWEP/extended winter provision. If the hub is at full capacity or individuals reject assistance from the hub, they should still be offered shelter under SWEP. The service providing SWEP should encourage individuals to accept support in order to avoid a return to the streets. The SWEP team may come to understand why other offers have been declined, and use this to source a more appropriate plan for that person.

### Examples from practice

- Base assessment hub staff at the local SWEP service to take referrals when it opens.
- Continued use of assessment hubs throughout the year to decrease the numbers of individuals on the street who may otherwise require SWEP

### Daytime shelter

At times local authorities will need to make provision for shelter in the daytime, for example due to snow, ice, flooding or heatwave. Review and map existing day services and their opening times, as well as identifying any services that could extend their SWEP into daytime (e.g. communal areas of hostels). Ask day centres or other providers to adjust opening times to improve access from day to night provision, and offer contact with support staff where possible to continue working on someone’s route away from the streets. Look at options such as existing public spaces (e.g. town hall, council reception, libraries) where people could be signposted during the day for shelter. Note that demand is usually lower in the daytime, which may increase your options. If night shelters ask people to leave in the morning, without offering day provision, there is more likely to be an impact on the local area from people being active on the streets with nowhere else to go.

### Rural areas

In rural areas, or areas with no known rough sleeping, it may appear that there is little need to offer SWEP. However, a SWEP offer should be prepared in case people require it. Small or isolated Local Authorities should either work with neighbouring councils to devise joint solutions, or identify options themselves, perhaps in partnership with voluntary, faith or community partners. It should not be policy to offer referral to urban areas when provision could be made available locally, close to people's social networks and services. This may mean accessing spaces that are not traditionally used. Rural authorities have previously used guest houses, pubs and church halls, being flexible in response to small numbers in any given location.

### 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, safety planning and practical arrangements (e.g. bedding/laundry) should take into account health issues that may arise in communal spaces such as the spread of parasites (e.g. scabies) and infectious diseases (e.g. TB), but without becoming unduly risk averse. Relevant medical or public health advice should be 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. NHS cards can be created to help people access GP registration:

[www.homeless.org.uk/connect/features/2017/oct/06/homelessness-and-healthcare-right-to-register](http://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/features/2017/oct/06/homelessness-and-healthcare-right-to-register)

### Examples from practice

- Arrange for health professionals such as GPs, nurses, dentists and podiatrists to be present on site. This enables interventions that individuals might not otherwise access, and leads to positive health outcomes.
- Community Nursing and Homeless outreach increases engagement with those not otherwise engaging; huge difference in being able to engage with most entrenched, complex and chaotic people.

## Engaging people

### Making the right support offer

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 have partnerships with day centre services so that people have somewhere to go in the mornings where they can get help to end their homelessness, as well as keeping warm and dry.

Support might include access to move-on accommodation, healthcare, education, employment, substance use services, benefits advice and creative/leisure activities. It is good practice to recognise and build on people's strengths as part of working collaboratively to solve immediate problems. 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.

## Homeless Link

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, or the support offer might not be right for them, and this should be respected. The priority is to reduce the risk of immediate harm in severe weather. Continue to offer support over time, as people may become ready for change later on.

### Examples from practice

- Provide free transport to collect service users from SWEP in the mornings and take them to a local day centre to access support.
- Outreach staff with lived experience of homelessness engaging people normally described 'hard to reach'
- Introduce a Breakfast Club, allowing people to stay longer in the mornings and have a hot breakfast. This provides an opportunity to engage people and improve move-on outcomes.
- Employ staff and volunteers who speak the same languages as people using SWEP.
- Bring in staff from other services, e.g. assessment hub coordinator, to engage people during SWEP
- Meetings between local authority and SWEP provider in advance of severe weather to discuss and agree move on options for individuals placed
- Recognising the complex issues people face, giving further chances even if a placement was 'failed'
- When someone is asked to leave due to an incident, they are welcomed back next night – no fixed exclusions
- Working with partners to provide a lead worker for people with the most complex needs, to build a strong relationship with the individual and navigate through services and systems that can be bewildering
- Co-ordinated approach and partnership between the council, rough sleeper outreach team, voluntary organisation, community Matron and supported accommodation provider

### People refusing shelter

Services regularly report difficulties in persuading some people to access accommodation. There are a range of reasons why people refuse and, ultimately, individuals with capacity may make choices that other people find hard to understand. At the same time, rough sleeping is a high risk situation and people might find it harder to make decisions if they are exhausted, hungry, afraid, in pain, intoxicated etc. So there is a balance to be struck here between respecting the choices and autonomy of the individual, and continuing to make offers of support and checking on that person's welfare. Many services have experienced someone refusing a bed for years, until one day they are ready to access support. Change is always possible.

Outreach teams should be having regular conversations to understand people's 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. Ask what the right housing offer is to bring them indoors and see if this can be arranged.

If someone continues to refuse help during severe weather despite being at risk of, or already experiencing, harm, 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:

[www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-mental-capacity-act](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-mental-capacity-act)  
[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: [www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-mental-capacity-act](http://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-mental-capacity-act) is 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. However, some people sleeping rough might not be happy about Police approaching them, so review this option on a case by case basis, and consider what alternatives are available.

### Examples from practice

Provide continued monitoring and support to rough sleepers who refuse to accept shelter. Outreach teams make frequent visits with provisions and information about services. Individuals are encouraged to access SWEP facilities even if they choose not to sleep in the shelter.

Again, it is important to be flexible and offer a range of accommodation options if possible. Individuals or groups may not feel comfortable sharing communal floor space, and alternatives should be made available wherever possible e.g. separate space/services for women, LGBTQ people, 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.

### 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 should 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 and/or want to reconnect with family or social networks. Reconnection is only appropriate if you have confirmed that someone has access to housing and support elsewhere – it should not result in someone continuing to be street homeless, just in a different location:

[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/)

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

[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)

### Examples from practice

- Commit to finding move-on accommodation for all service users before asking them to leave their SWEP provision. Keep provision open until all placements have been made.
- Invite SWEP clients to access pre-tenancy training courses. Work with partners to find rent deposits for hostel residents so that hostel spaces are freed up for severe weather clients.
- Use starter tenancies and assistance via bond schemes for move on to suitable accommodation.
- Use dedicated staff to assess and support people to move on.
- Extend provision to allow time for individuals to be assessed and supported for move on.
- Make agreement for sharing needs and risk assessments to enable quick transfers from SWEP to permanent housing.
- LA taking a flexible approach to providing temporary accommodation to people who would not be in priority need, if they expressed an interest and were willing to engage with support services.
- Build trusted professional relationships with those who access SWEP – respond quickly and effectively when the light goes on in the individual's head and they express interest in accessing longer term accommodation.

## Supporting teams and volunteers

### 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 to respond to the unpredictable nature of SWEP.

- Professional boundary training is essential for volunteers. Training should also cover areas such as safeguarding, effective communication and de-escalation of 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.
- Actively recruit volunteers with lived experience of homelessness and consider diversifying your team (e.g. gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, languages) to improve service provision.
- 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. There should be simple protocols for responding to incidents, covering on-call access where experienced staff are not present, and contact details for external agencies.

## Homeless Link

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)

### Examples from practice

- Recruit peer volunteers with personal experience of rough sleeping from nearby hostels to improve engagement with more 'hard-to-reach' individuals.
- Review/improve the application procedure for volunteers e.g. DBS check, interviews and comprehensive training programme.
- Recruit all volunteers in advance of the service opening and provide training over several days to cover practical considerations about running a shelter, as well as information on health and safety and maintaining professional boundaries.
- Ensure staff rota during winter to ensure SWEP could always be covered when activated
- Volunteer recruitment campaigns: one council recruited, trained, supported and placed 30 volunteers
- Provide training to all shelter managers and at least one volunteer from each shelter
- Ask shelter guests to participate in the running of the shelter
- Work in a community partnership to increase involvement from volunteers and access to other venues
- Use volunteers to support referrals at access point, then there's a familiar face in the evening
- Harness the enthusiasm and compassion of volunteers – the experience can completely change perceptions and attitudes, with volunteers becoming ambassadors about the issues facing homeless people and for the service

### Managing risk and creating a safe environment

The wide eligibility criteria for SWEP/winter provision can increase risk across a number of areas, both for people using and delivering the service, for example: large shared spaces, unfamiliar facilities, people who are banned from services, people that you have little information about, or people 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. Ask people about ways to help them manage/avoid risky behaviour and what might help them to stay safe and use the service appropriately. Focus on their skills and strengths – ask about past examples of successful engagement with housing and support. Consider any risk from others.

Where possible, brief and relevant information should be requested from an agency that knows the individual. Developing a working relationship with Police can mean that checks are done quickly. If high risk is identified, this should not be seen as an automatic reason for exclusion, but as an opportunity to put measures in place to make the space as safe as possible or to make an alternative plan, e.g. B&B instead of communal shelter. 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, with reasons recorded and reviewed at the earliest opportunity.

## Homeless Link

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, clearly communicated 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 respond 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, some ask for abstinence overnight but hold cans ready for when people wake up, while others have developed policies to allow controlled drinking in a designated part of the shelter. It's important that people don't have to make a decision between the risk of severe weather and the risk of alcohol withdrawal. It might be helpful to focus on someone's behaviour when they arrive as the benchmark to assess risk, rather than having a blanket policy that assumes all alcohol use is unmanageable.

In some cases, people may be reluctant to accept a bed if their routine is to be very active at night (sometimes, but not always, related to their drug use). To reduce risks for these people, it might be that they are encouraged to come for a meal and to warm up even if they don't want a bed, or they are able to use a sit-up service/reception room to come and go rather than having to bed down, without disturbing other guests. People who experience insomnia and heavy smokers might also appreciate these options.

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, in turn reducing the likelihood of incidents of aggression.

### Examples from practice

- Inform guests about the rules around alcohol at referral and ask them to sign to confirm that they understand them before booking in, to help set expectations in advance and encourage people to drink less ahead of provision opening.
- Ongoing partnership work with agencies such as probation and police to discuss and assess risk factors.
- Speak to each client individually about rules and expectations when accessing SWEP each night.
- Use local hotels or B&B where risks mean individuals can't be placed in a communal lounge area.
- Be flexible and willing to make exceptions in response to individual needs e.g. a shelter assessed a transgender guest as too vulnerable to be housed in the communal areas available, so a local charity agreed to pay for hotel.
- Help people to feel comfortable and safe e.g. referral agency accompanies each person to the accommodation, gives a tour and induction, helps them to settle in.



## 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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