SWEP Guidance 2020-21
Planning of SWEP and extended winter provision for people sleeping rough during Covid-19

Produced by
The National Practice Development Team

Acknowledgements
With thanks to everyone who responded to Homeless Link’s survey

Published
November 2020 – Version 1
Homeless Link

About
Every year, Homeless Link publishes a guide 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.

The information provided is based on our previous guidance but includes adaptations related to Covid-19 and drawing on intelligence gathered through a survey we undertook in October 2020.

Whilst every effort will be made to update this guidance in light of any further Government advice, local areas should be proactive in keeping themselves informed of emerging information.

SWEP planning 2020-21
Due to the health risks posed by the Coronavirus pandemic, many of the accommodation options that have been previously used for SWEP and extended winter provision, are now deemed unsafe due to their communal nature. This year local authorities’ cold weather planning needs to ensure that people who sleep rough are safeguarded against both the cold weather and the risks posed by the pandemic.

Homeless Link has collected information about how some areas are planning for SWEP and cold weather this coming winter. In October 2020, we sent out a survey and received responses from 84 different areas. This included 81 local authorities and three homelessness support providers (two commissioned and one non-commissioned).

This year, local areas are under increased pressure to safeguard people experiencing homelessness from both Covid-19 and cold weather. We encourage you to work with partners to identify and plan local and diverse options and to make use of, and mobilise, the different resources available. Homeless Link will continue to share intelligence with policy makers so please do get in touch to let us know of any particular challenges your area is facing: joanne.prestidge@homelesslink.org.uk
General information about SWEP

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.

Local areas should have adequate provision to prevent rough sleeping at any time of year, however the winter period often presents the 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.

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.¹

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

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.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocols: preventing harm and 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. Authorities should review and amend their SWEP in consultation with partner agencies after each winter.

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 usually be agreed by the end of September (or as soon as possible) 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

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 experiencing homelessness, 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).

Verification (confirming that someone has been seen sleeping rough) is sometimes used to ensure that people who are most in need are prioritised for accommodation, 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 options
In the past, many organisations have opened emergency access accommodation independently throughout the winter period. These are often operated 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. Due to Covid-19, the majority of these accommodation options will not be opening and as such, there may be an increase in the number of people that will need SWEP if it is activated (see page 7 for more detail).

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.
Accommodation and funding

Covid-safe accommodation types
Local authorities and their partners should make every effort to provide self-contained accommodation options for people sleeping rough this winter. Local authorities and public health must make it a priority to work alongside faith and community groups and homelessness charities to accommodate everyone safely, regardless of immigration status, previous housing experience and local connection.

Authorities responding to our October 2020 survey said they planned on using a range of the following types of accommodation:
- B&Bs, hotels and hostels (including block booking)
- Units funded through Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP)
- Hostels and supported accommodation including ‘crash pads’
- Placements across the supported housing pathway
- Emergency provision which already exists due to Covid-19
- Self-contained temporary accommodation
- Vacant council buildings
- Council owned self-contained units
- Student accommodation
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)
- Nightstop for 16-24 year olds
- Innovative temporary housing models such as ‘pods’

Additional support and resources
Providing more dispersed and self-contained accommodation options is likely to mean that additional support and resources (such as food) will need to be mobilised in order to meet the needs of people being housed. Working with partner agencies to adapt existing provision or create new support packages will be essential.

‘We will continue to utilise our commissioned rough sleeping beds (30) and have procured an additional 8 SWEP units using short-term NSAP funding. Over and above this we will facilitate two sit-up spaces in supported accommodation schemes, and will spot purchase hotel provision where demand exceeds supply. Our Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) Team will continue to undertake regular outreach and ‘sweeps’ of the borough to ensure individuals are identified and supported’.

‘We have commissioned 8 SWEP beds and have the ability to use our own homelessness hostel. The voluntary sector are also reviewing their offer and looking at alternative accommodation in which they can deliver winter provision which includes SWEP provision. We will fall back on bed and breakfast provision if required’.

‘As a LA we took on a block of flats for the Covid provision and we are looking at stepping up a couple more of these to use as SWEP/ crash pad facilities. We have asked our commissioned providers if they could step up one place each, as we know they cannot share. Also as a last resort we would use B&B’.

‘Emergency temporary accommodation, own room with shared facilities, unless symptomatic of Covid when self-contained units will be provided for self-isolation’.
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.

**Top tips:**
- Ensure accommodation has adequate facilities for washing, cooking, sleeping and storage of belongings
- Ensure accommodation is high quality and designed with the comfort and well-being of individuals in mind e.g. new beds, smoking shelters, dog kennels and free access to veterinary care
- Develop good working relationships with B&B staff. Train them in working with the client group in order to provide a safe and welcoming environment.

Over the summer Homeless Link created brief information webinars for people new to homelessness: [https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/covid-19-guidance-for-hotel-staff-volunteers](https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/covid-19-guidance-for-hotel-staff-volunteers)

- Provide outreach and assessment to reduce 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
- Work with a neighbouring local authority to plan for SWEP and coordinate/increase the provision available

Guidance prepared on supporting people in Covid-19 emergency hotel accommodation can be accessed here: [https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness](https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness)

**Communal accommodation options**

Due to Covid-19, some accommodation traditionally used for SWEP and extended winter provision is no longer viable. This has a number of implications in terms of capacity of provision, the funding required and logistics of support delivery.

**Night shelters**

On 13th October 2020, the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government published a set of operating principles for those areas/services that were considering opening a night shelter. This does not endorse the use of night shelters but sets out that these should be 'used as a last resort' when alternative options are unavailable and where there is a risk to health and life if an individual remains on the street. It is essential that these principles are followed when it is necessary that a shelter is opened: [www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-provision-of-night-shelters](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-provision-of-night-shelters)

It is Homeless Link’s view that, due to the ongoing risk from Covid-19, local areas should seek to provide self-contained accommodation for all people experiencing homelessness this winter. Local authorities and their partners must thoroughly explore and exhaust all other possible options before taking a decision to open a night shelter. We encourage night shelter providers to work with their local authority and public health teams to identify alternative options and where it is decided that communal shelter still needs to be provided, that this is done so safely and in line with the Government principles.

**Hostel shared spaces**

In previous years, communal spaces in hostels have often been used to provide temporary shelter for people during cold weather. As with night shelters, it is unlikely that some of these arrangements will be Covid-safe, and any decisions about use of these spaces must adhere to the night shelter principles. Use of hostels for SWEP should adhere to the Government Covid-19 hostel guidance:
In the survey, local authorities shared information about some of their plans to adapt communal accommodation options to be Covid-safe.

‘We will have a re-modelled night shelter service with about 6 bed spaces in a shared house’.

‘The local authority is taking a lead on finding accommodation, the winter shelter provider is providing support with volunteers and resources’.

‘Our shelter worked with the council to secure a space that can be modified to adhere to covid-safe sleeping spaces. However, in order to ensure that it is covid safe, they will need to work under-capacity (keeping voids), so while we will have 13 bed spaces, it could have been 15’.

‘Working in partnership with local voluntary sector partners who would usually run night shelters to ensure that people are supported in their temporary accommodation placements, accessing support, food etc’.

‘We intend to use more of council owned units- so the volunteers will revert to a befriending role and proving support by other means in terms of assistance with food, benefit claims and more of holistic role’.

‘We will be using the old night shelter building whilst their present building is being redeveloped. It has 5 rooms and has been checked with Public Health for covid compliance’.

‘We have worked with our shelter to find them a building with self-contained rooms as opposed to their usual rolling church shelter model’.

‘Our previous Christmas Shelter will not be in operation this year but will be open to provide food only as a takeaway service’.

**Top tips:**

- Work in partnership so that communal/shared accommodation options are only implemented when leaving someone on the street would be a risk to health or life
- If a shelter is open, ensure other provision is coordinated so that someone can be supported to self-isolate if testing positive for Covid-19
- Any provision must adhere to Government guidance and principles
- Local authorities and public health should prioritise working with commissioned and non-commissioned services to adapt provision
- Ensure local shelter providers are aware of the guidance and are supported to develop alternative options
- Shelter providers still planning to open communal provision should engage with Public Health to have plans approved

Any types of accommodation used should be fully risk assessed in relation to Government advice on Covid-19 and, preferably, with the involvement of local Public Health teams.
Managing accommodation access and turnover
Due to the temporary nature of SWEP, and potential for turnover in either self-contained or shared spaces, it will be important that steps are taken to prevent the spread of infection. Advice on how to decontaminate facilities can be accessed here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings

Funding
The Government has announced a £10m Cold Weather Payment for councils, and an additional £2m fund for faith and community groups. Homeless Link is administering the £2m Winter Transformation Fund to voluntary and community sector groups to transform spaces and make more self-contained emergency accommodation available. It will not fund traditional night shelter provision.

Ideas about funding from the recent survey include:
- Ring-fencing funding from savings made elsewhere
- Using diverse funding such as NSAP, re-profiled RSI budgets, cold weather funding
- Maximising Housing Benefit

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. 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.

Top tips:
- Pool resources with neighbouring authorities to create options tailored for specific cohorts
- Coordinate with other authorities to ensure reduced competition for affordable temporary solutions
- Use social media campaigns to increase donations from the community
- Encourage shelter providers to apply for Winter Transformation funding
- Block book hotel rooms and negotiate reduced rates
- Work with commissioned providers, and faith and community groups, to coordinate roles and resources
- Engage and involve Housing Benefit colleagues from the planning stage where relevant, to ensure all potential income is gathered
General guidance on delivering SWEP

Identifying need
Planning for SWEP should be based on current local need, with a plan for unexpected demand/exceptionally severe weather. 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. You will need to know, not only numbers, but also what support needs are likely to present, the types of housing and support that will be suitable, how much provision is needed for couples, dogs etc.

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 still planning on 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. All project logistics must comply with guidance related to Covid-19.

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, to reduce delays and frustrations at night. Later check-out times, with links/transport to move-on accommodation or other 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.

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2 See Westminster Exceptional SWEP case study: www.homeless.org.uk/swep
3 www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit
While policies and procedures should be in place, try to be flexible – it can be difficult 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

Top tips:
- Don’t forget the practicalities: catering, bedding, laundry etc
- Introduce daytime booking in slots so that staff can fully assess and explain how the service will work
- Stay open until Monday to improve coordination with other support services
- 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 people sleeping rough when SWEP is activated

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 when the service is being delivered quickly, 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.4

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 should not automatically exclude them from provision. 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

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

**Top Tips:**

- 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)

**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 support providers), 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.

**Top tips:**

- Designate or employ a SWEP/winter provision Coordinator to act as a single point of contact over this period (and ensure responsibilities are delegated when absent from work)
- 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 come into contact with people sleeping rough (especially out of hours) are aware of provision and referral routes

Flyers with information of how to access SWEP

Consider how people will travel to SWEP or other emergency provision and ensure distances and travel costs are not a barrier for accessing the service

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.

Top tips:

Use multi-agency meetings and forums to plan SWEP early

Work with other local authorities or sub-regionally to coordinate provision, including any joint commissioning of support teams

Work with registered providers to find accommodation for those accepting SWEP

Keep updated about who is sleeping rough and their support needs and accommodation preferences

Monitor temperatures and communicate with partners to ensure provision can be implemented quickly

Encourage partnership working between the police and outreach services in order to identify and support individuals in need

Encourage multi-agency communication daily in order to coordinate SWEP so that everyone can access provision – this could be daily email and phone calls about activation and options

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 or use a multi-agency ‘task and targeting’ or ‘by name’ group in advance of opening severe weather provision; such as those many authorities established at the start of the pandemic in order to coordinate and plan support. 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

This year, more than ever, it will be incredibly important that health and public health agencies are involved in multi-agency planning and coordination of support due to the health risks of both Covid-19 and cold weather.
Health services
Local authorities and their partners must ensure that support is in place to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission and to ensure that individuals can self-isolate if need be.

Recent guidance on working with health services during Covid-19 can be accessed at https://homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness

People can also 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. Relevant medical or public health advice should be sought to manage any concerns.

Top tips:
- Liaise with public health and other health colleagues to reduce the risks posed by both Covid-19 and exposure to cold weather
- Link with local GPs or clinics to offer people ways to manage their health; people can be referred to GPs as temporary patients
- 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
- Arrange for health professionals to visit individuals in a proactive and responsive way to ensure health is monitored and support is provided when needed.

Daytime provision
In the past we have encouraged local authorities to make available day time provision for individuals who are being housed in accommodation options that are not accessible during the day. We would hope, given the guidance above, that the need for this will be limited this year due to the increased use of self-contained housing options.

If provision which is not accessible during the day will still be used then the following recommendations apply.
- Shelter should be provided to people during the daytime to manage health risks related to the cold weather
- Review and map existing day services and their opening times, as well as identifying any services that could extend their SWEP into daytime


Rural areas and areas with no known rough sleeping
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 should people require it and is even more crucial due to the additional consequences and risks of the pandemic. 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 a range of provision, being flexible in response to small numbers in any given location.

**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. If night shelter provision is to be used, shelter providers should link and coordinate with agencies that are there to support people during the day.

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 listen to what the individual themselves wants and to recognise and build on their 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.

While individuals should always be encouraged to accept the support that is provided, this should not be a condition of accessing accommodation. 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.

**Top tips:**

- Outreach staff with lived experience of homelessness can be successful at engaging people normally described ‘hard to reach’
- Employ staff and volunteers who speak the same languages as people using SWEP
- Bring in staff from other services to engage people during SWEP
- Partner agencies to discuss and agree potential move-on options in advance of severe weather
- Recognising the complex issues people face, giving further chances even if a previous placement ‘failed’
- If 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 health professionals 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 accept 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
www.homeless.org.uk/working-with-mental-health-services

Take a look at this blog: Understanding entrenched rough sleeping during COVID-19

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 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).

People’s ability to make decisions about accepting offers of housing may be impacted by needs such as autism and brain injury. Evidence suggests that there are higher rates of these needs in people experiencing homelessness. Homeless Link has published guidance about engaging and supporting individuals with these conditions in mind and should be referred to when considering how information is presented and discussed with individuals:
https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/autism-homelessness
https://www.homeless.org.uk/brain-injury-and-homelessness

Top tips:
- Work with the Police as this can be helpful to assess risk where people are staying out in severe weather, especially in areas without an outreach team
- However, be aware that 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
- Continue to monitor and support people who refuse to accept shelter through making frequent visits and providing resources and information
- Continue to encourage people to access SWEP facilities and try to accommodate different needs through providing a options for different cohorts and individuals
- Keep in mind that trauma, autism and brain injury can all impact how people engage with support offers
 Ensure agencies are aware of the mental capacity act toolkit and when to use it
 Be transparent and upfront about all aspects of the provision so that individuals can make informed decisions, know what to expect and what is expected of them

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 and where there is lower provision or demand, consider 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. This year any reconnections must be planned and undertaken safely, in line with Government guidance.

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/assessment-and-reconnections-toolkit
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:


Top tips:
 Commit to finding move-on accommodation for all individuals before they are asked to leave
 Keep provision open until all placements have been made
 Consider how people can be supported around pre-tenancy education whilst they are accessing cold weather provision
 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
 Make agreement for sharing needs and risk assessments to enable quick transfers from SWEP to permanent housing
 Take a flexible approach to providing temporary accommodation to people who would not be in priority need, if they express an interest and are willing to engage with support services
 Build trusted professional relationships with those who access SWEP; responding quickly and effectively to interest in move on accommodation
Supporting teams and volunteers

Guidance on recruiting and mobilising volunteers during Covid-19 can be accessed on https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness

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. Over the summer we created brief information webinars for people new to homelessness: https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/covid-19-guidance-for-hotel-staff-volunteers and there are a number of free recorded webinars which can be promoted here: https://www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/webinar-catchup

- 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 – 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

For more information on supporting volunteers please see: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/practical-guidance-on-managing-volunteers-in-homelessness-services

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. Examples include people accessing 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. 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.

There are a range of resources about supporting people effectively during Covid-19 here: 
https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness

Top tips:

- Provide people with masks to be worn in shared spaces
- Inform individuals about any rules at referral and ensure communication is adapted to their needs
- Ongoing partnership work with agencies such as probation and police to discuss and assess risk factors
- Use local hotels or B&B where risks mean individuals can’t be placed in shared or communal facilities
Be flexible and willing to make exceptions in response to individual needs

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

**People refusing or unable to self-isolate**
Please see the brief guidance about this on [https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness](https://www.homeless.org.uk/covid19-homelessness)

**Further information**
Please get in touch if you have any further questions or comments on this guidance, or wish to share intelligence or practice examples now or in future surveys.

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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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