

How to Help Homeless People



Helping homeless people

A guide for clergy, staff and parishioners

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

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

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

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

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



What is homelessness?

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

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

Getting help

Your local council must help anyone who is legally homeless and does not have secure accommodation of their own. This includes those who are sleeping on friends' sofas, are about to be made homeless, or are escaping violence.

How much help is given depends upon the individual's circumstances. They may be provided with accommodation, or just given advice.

In order to qualify for housing an individual must be all of the following:

- **Legally homeless.** Including those who are about to become homeless.
- **Eligible for help.** Either a British citizen, or someone with the right to reside in the UK with access to public funds.
- **In priority need.** This covers a wide range of personal circumstances such as being responsible for dependent children under 18, having an illness or disability that makes them vulnerable, or having been in care or prison.
- **Homeless through no fault of their own.** This disqualifies those who lost their home due to arrears or anti-social behaviour, or left their home voluntarily.
- **Have a local connection.** Through living, working or close family connections in an area for a certain period of time (varies according to council).

Getting help from the council can be a complicated and intimidating process. People may need help to make phone calls, fill in forms, and attend interviews.

Look on your local authority website to get contact numbers for housing advice, and write them on the enclosed display poster so that you have them to hand.

Other sources of help

Many people do not qualify for help from the council, but the council will still give them advice on where to go next, depending on their circumstances.

Sometimes the advice is that they need to return to an area where they have historical or local connections in order to get help.

Advice is also available from:

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

There are also organisations that help particular groups of people:

16-25 year olds

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

People escaping domestic violence

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

Veterans

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

People with mental health problems

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

Refugees

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

Helping people who are sleeping rough

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

If you are concerned about someone you have seen sleeping rough call StreetLink on **0300 500 0914** or contact them on **Streetlink.org.uk**. The StreetLink team will ensure the person sleeping rough connects with the services in their local area, to help them off the streets as quickly as possible.

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

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

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

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

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



Helping homeless people

The poster overleaf is intended to help staff and parishioners respond to homeless people who come to the church for help.

Please pull out the poster, fill in details of local services, and display it in a prominent place for easy reference.

Helping homeless callers



Helping homeless people

Do not...

... put yourself, your family, or your colleagues at risk

Put your own safety above the needs of the caller

An addiction or mental illness can sometimes make a person abusive, dishonest, or violent. Do not leave valuables or keys in sight. Have your mobile phone to hand.

... give a homeless caller money

Money can feed the addiction that kills them

Instead, if it is appropriate, give them food and drink. Do not be embarrassed about closing the door on someone while you get the food or drink.

... tolerate abuse or bad behaviour

If they are abusive ask them to stop

If they won't, and pose an imminent threat, call the police on **999**. Otherwise, inform local police on **101** of any abuse so that they can monitor people who may be a threat to others.

Direct them to local drop-in services

Find your local day centre and night shelters on www.homeless.org.uk and fill in the details below:

Drop-in day centre

Tel

Opening times

Emergency night shelter

Tel

Opening times

Encourage them to seek support

The best help you can give is to link them with homelessness services through the local council. Many homeless callers will not want to engage with services, but if they do want help, you can call:

The Local Housing Advice team on

The Shelter Helpline on **0808 800 4444**

Do...

... be polite but wary

If you have time, talk to the individual and listen to their story

However, do not let uninvited callers into your home or office, but speak to them in a public place.

... ensure that they are not a danger to themselves or others

- If you are worried for the safety of someone sleeping rough call **StreetLink** on **0300 500 0914**
- If the homeless person is in immediate danger, call an ambulance or police on **999**
- If you believe that they may be a danger to you or to others, call the police on **999**

Helping long-term rough sleepers

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

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

Write details of local services on the enclosed display poster. It is helpful to have directions printed out and ready to give to people.

There are also places that distribute food and clothing; information about local provision can be found on **ThePavement.org.uk**. Again it is useful to have details and directions printed out and ready to give to homeless callers.

Don't give money

Many rough sleepers have addictions, and giving them money will feed this addiction. In particular, modern psychoactive drugs are cheap and readily available. They are completely destroying thousands of lives, as users become violent, often towards themselves, and may suffer permanent brain damage. Some addicts spend £80-£100 a day on drugs, all gained through street begging. No matter what their story is, do not give rough sleepers money.

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

It is not illegal to sleep rough, but it is illegal to beg in a public place. Rough sleepers can also be moved on for antisocial behaviour. If someone becomes aggressive when asking for money, report them to the police. Contact local police on 101.

Keeping safe

Don't put yourself, or others, at risk

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

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

Be friendly, but wary

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

Never give money

Money can feed an addiction, which will eventually kill. Instead of money give food and drink. Have a stock of non-perishable food so that it can be given quickly. Do not be embarrassed to close the door on someone while you get the food.

Be aware of potential danger

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

Don't tolerate abuse

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

Being realistic and effective

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

Usually the best way to genuinely help a homeless person is to connect them with local services. This does not mean that you are passing the buck to another person; on the contrary, they may still need a great deal of support to access these services.

Managing expectations and behaviour

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

Protecting vulnerable people

Many homeless people are vulnerable so take care not to put yourself in a situation where you could be accused of abuse. Remember that you are in a position of power and treat them with compassion.

Providing practical help and services

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

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

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

Church Housing Trust supports people who have been homeless by funding the help they need to rebuild their lives. Our roots go back to 1882 when Revd Wilson Carlile began working with homeless people in central London. To this day, we uphold the Christian values of supporting those in need, regardless of their faith or nationality.



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Signed _____ **Date** _____