

How to Help Homeless People



A guide for clergy, staff and parishioners

The number of homeless people is increasing, and some of them will turn to the 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 through 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 the long-term rough sleepers who call asking for money. It also gives 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.

The Housing Crisis

There are thousands of people in England who cannot afford suitable accommodation on any given night. Some of them are sofa-surfing; some of them are sleeping on night buses or pavements; and others are trapped in abusive relationships because they have nowhere else to go.

Having a home does not mean that someone is secure. More people are now renting in the private sector than in the social housing sector. Rents have risen ahead of incomes and many tenants are in arrears and go without food or heating in order to pay the rent. Private rental tenancies can be ended with as little as two months' notice.

Getting help

Your local council has a statutory duty to house people without appropriate accommodation. This includes those who are sleeping on friends' sofas, those who are about to be made homeless and those who are suffering domestic abuse.

However, resources are inadequate, and help is subject to tight eligibility criteria, which exclude many people. The key criteria are:

- **Are they really homeless?** Do they have somewhere they could go?
- **Are they eligible for help?** This is dependent on immigration status and work history.
- **Are they in priority need?** For example are they responsible for dependent children under 18, or do they have an illness or disability that makes them particularly vulnerable?
- **Are they intentionally homeless?** Did they leave a home voluntarily?
- **Do they have a connection with the borough?** Do they have a local connection, or do they have family or work in the area?

Getting help from the council is a complex process that can take some time. You can offer to help someone to make phone calls, fill in forms, or even 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 **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 **0207 939 1235** (office hours only)
- Get Connected 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**
- Veteran's Aid will assess a person's needs and find appropriate support, including housing **0800 012 6867**

People with mental health problems

- 24-hour mental health support helpline **0800 731 2864**
- The Samaritans **116 123**

Refugees

- If a refugee needs specific support or advice, contact the Refugee Council **020 7346 6700**
Refugeecouncil.org.uk

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 which 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 long-term rough sleepers

For those who are unable or unwilling to get off the street, all we can do is to 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 services, and some require referrals by 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 also useful 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 sometimes suffer permanent brain damage. Some addicts are spending £80-£100 a day on drugs, all gained through street begging. No matter what their story is, do not give homeless people 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. Be aware that 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 in turn destroys their life. Instead, if it is appropriate, give them food and drink. Have a stock of non-perishable food to hand so that it can be given quickly. Do not be embarrassed about closing 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 being abusive or behaving badly, ask them to stop. If they won't stop, or pose an imminent threat, call the police on 999. Inform the 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 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 which 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

We encourage churches to discuss how they can best help homeless people, 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 projects to help homeless people is available from **Housingjustice.org.uk**

This guide was produced by Church Housing Trust in partnership with Housing Justice and Caritas. We recognise that there is a growing need as more people become homeless, and that currently churches across the UK are providing many ad hoc and organised services for homeless people.

We are working together to help churches be safer and more effective in their outreach to homeless people, and to raise awareness among church leaders and the government of the urgent need for more resources, coordination and preventative action to halt the rise of homelessness and its damaging effects on both individuals and society.



Housing Justice



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Signed _____ Date _____

Please return your form to:
Church Housing Trust, PO Box 50296, London EC1P 1WF

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