



Church
Homeless
Charity

Guide for Churches

How to Help Homeless People



If you are worried about a rough sleeper who may be in immediate danger, call 999 or 101 to speak to the police. Alternatively, ensure that the person is helped quickly by alerting StreetLink – [thestreetlink.org.uk](https://www.thestreetlink.org.uk)



This guide aims to equip churches and other places of worship with the tools needed to assist homeless callers.



The number of people without homes is increasing, and some of them will turn to a place of worship for help. It can be hard to know where to start because homeless people can have multiple needs, and people often fear giving the wrong advice.

The purpose of this guide is to help you to respond to this growing need safely and compassionately.

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What causes homelessness?

Every person is an individual with their own unique circumstances which led to them becoming homeless. It is important to show an interest and listen to them.



Immediate causes of homelessness can include:

- ▶ Fleeing domestic abuse
- ▶ Leaving care
- ▶ Mental health problems
- ▶ Substance abuse and alcohol problems
- ▶ Leaving prison
- ▶ Eviction
- ▶ Debt
- ▶ Job loss
- ▶ Leaving the Armed Forces

This is exacerbated by social issues such as:

- ▶ Lack of social housing
- ▶ Inadequate housing benefit
- ▶ Unaffordable and insecure private rental sector
- ▶ Discrimination and inequality
- ▶ Low pay and insecure work



Rough sleeping rose by 20% in England between 2023 and 2024.

Source: [shelter.org.uk](https://www.shelter.org.uk)

Assisting a homeless caller

Awareness and being prepared are vital in helping those who are homeless. First, we should be aware that homelessness takes many forms.

Indeed, a member of your congregation could be at risk of homelessness. Special sermons or services, accessible resources and open communication can help those people to raise the issue and obtain the support they need before the situation escalates.

Offering to help with filling in forms, making phone calls and attending appointments is an invaluable way of helping someone to find or keep their home.

▶ **Statutory homelessness**

Local authorities have a duty to secure accommodation for certain groups of people. However, the eligibility criteria are strict, and few individuals receive permanent housing.

Migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) are at high risk of homelessness. The status means that they cannot access benefits, council housing or homeless help.



Households, particularly those with children, may be offered temporary accommodation as a first step.

▶ **Rough sleeping**

This is the visible and often most dangerous type of homelessness. It includes parks, train stations, shop doorways etc. People who sleep rough may fall outside of the definitions of statutory homelessness and move in and out of temporary accommodation.

▶ **Hidden homelessness**

Those who are not entitled to help with accommodation, or those who don't seek help from their local council can fall into this category. Many stay in hostels or B&Bs, squats, or 'concealed' housing such as floors and sofas of family and friends. These people are usually not counted in official statistics, but make up the majority of single homeless people in England.



Be prepared

When homeless people reach out to places of worship for help, you may want to have some resources to hand, and we recommend printing out our resources listed at the end of this guide. In addition, you may want to familiarise yourself with the support services in your area.

Lastly, ensure that you and anyone else who may interact with a homeless caller takes care of their own safety and wellbeing (see the next section).

It is important to remember that the best way to help someone is to put them in touch with local services. These services have specialist support and funding in place.

Keeping safe

1. Develop a safety plan

It is a good idea to draw up a safety plan and ensure your safeguarding information is up to date and readily available.

The plan should include the following:

- ▶ Potential risks to property and items
- ▶ Potential risks to people in your group
- ▶ What do to in an emergency
- ▶ Important phone numbers

An addiction or mental illness can sometimes make a person unintentionally abusive, dishonest, or violent. Assess the risks and minimise them; for example, do not leave valuables or keys in sight. Have your mobile phone to hand.

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. It is important to protect other vulnerable people, including children, when helping homeless people.

Above all, put your own safety above the needs of a homeless caller.

2. Be realistic

Showing kindness to a homeless person could help them to make positive changes in their lives. 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.

3. Set boundaries

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, for example drinking alcohol, swearing, littering, etc.

4. 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 the police of any abuse so that they can monitor people who may be a threat to others.

5. 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.

Helping a rough sleeper in your area

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.

Resources



Go to the **website of your local council** and search for 'helping rough sleepers' – each council will have their own numbers and links for help in the area.



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. Please note that many night shelters only operate in the winter months.



Go to **[Homeless.org.uk](https://www.homeless.org.uk)** and click the 'find a service' button.



Alternatively, send an alert to StreetLink, a 24-hour UK wide service that enables local services to engage quickly with people who are sleeping rough. **[thestreetlink.org.uk](https://www.thestreetlink.org.uk)**

Entrenched rough sleepers

People who have been on the streets for a long time, and find it difficult to break the cycle of homelessness are sometimes referred to as 'entrenched' rough sleepers.

They will probably be known to local services, who will be pleased to have your 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).

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.

If the rough sleeper is in immediate danger, needs medical assistance or is under 18 you should phone 999.



FAQs

Should I give cash to a homeless person?

Many rough sleepers have addictions and giving them money will feed this addiction. In particular, synthetic psychoactive drugs are cheap and readily available. They destroy thousands of lives, as users become violent, often towards themselves, and may suffer permanent brain damage.

You may want to keep a stock of small, helpful items to give instead of cash.

Examples: chocolate bars, non-perishable food, bottles of water, lighters, notebook and pens, tissues, sunblock, small shower gel/shampoo, books etc.

Rough sleeping is not illegal per se; however, it is illegal to beg in a public place. If someone becomes aggressive when asking for money, report them to the police by calling 101.

What about donating items to homeless charities or services?

Small items such as those mentioned above are useful for rough sleepers. However, many support services recommend that cash donations are the most effective way to assist. They can better allocate these funds to address the specific needs of homeless people and ensure that donations are distributed fairly and safely.

What if someone asks for a bed for the night?

Again, we recommend directing someone to the established support services in the area. See page 11 for contact information.

What else can the church do to help?

There is only so much that we can do as individuals – but when we work together we can achieve a lot more.

- 1. Services and sermons:** Special services about homelessness are a great tool for raising awareness and breaking stigmas. If you would like help with writing a service send an email to info@churchhomelesscharity.org.uk and we'd be happy to help.
- 2. Make your voice heard:** Try writing to your local MP regarding homelessness in your local area. Shelter have all the information you could need to find and contact the right people. https://england.shelter.org.uk/support_us/campaigns/writing_to_your_mp
- 3. Supporting homeless charities and support services:** you can do this through regular donating, fundraising, leaving money in a will or trust or volunteering your time to help.
- 4. Setting up a project for homeless people, such as a night shelter or a soup kitchen:** 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 and community groups can set up services to help homeless people is available from CUF.org.uk and Housingjustice.org.uk

Helplines



General advice

- ▶ Shelter Helpline **0808 800 4444** (Monday - Friday 8am - 6pm)
- ▶ The Citizen's Advice Bureau (England) **0800 144 8848**

Organisations that help particular groups of people:

16-25 year olds

- ▶ Nightstop UK helps young people into emergency accommodation. Runaway Helpline **116 000** (24-hour)
- ▶ Centrepoin give advice to young people on their housing situation and rights **0808 800 0661**

People escaping domestic violence

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

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 Infoline **0300 123 3393**
- ▶ The Samaritans (UK) **116 123** (24-hour)

Refugees

- ▶ Visit Refugeecouncil.org.uk and search their support directory for your nearest service or call **020 7346 6700**





About Church Homeless Charity

Every homeless person has their own needs, stories and struggles. We give personalised grants, tailored to their individual circumstances. There is no one size fits all, and we give the help that fits *them*.

Each year, around 3,000 people receive help from Church Homeless Charity. We receive no funding – all our grants are made possible through our donors.

We work with support services to identify those most in need of our help.

Examples of our support for homeless individuals:

- ▶ Training to help people into work
- ▶ Warm, clean clothes and shoes
- ▶ I.D. in order to apply for benefits, training, housing and work
- ▶ Items to improve temporary living accommodation, eg. curtains and carpets
- ▶ One-to-one counselling
- ▶ Digital inclusion

We're helping homeless people take the next step in their journey towards a home of their own. Help is available to everyone, regardless of their gender, sexuality, race or religion.

Strengthening people's confidence and building resilience are key to helping homeless people rebuild a life free from homelessness.

Additional resources from Church Homeless Charity:

- ▶ **Local support services slips**
To complete with details of your local services and keep a few copies to hand to give out
- ▶ **Helping homeless callers poster**
To print and make accessible to anyone who may interact with a homeless caller

Find more information at
www.churchhomelesscharity.org.uk





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