

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a person in a grey hoodie sitting in a chair, hunched over with their head buried in their arms. Two hands are placed on their shoulders, one from the left and one from the right, suggesting they are being comforted. The person on the left is wearing a blue and white striped shirt, and the person on the right is wearing a yellow sweater. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a library or a room with bookshelves.

Helping someone experiencing homelessness

**A practical guide
for churches**



If you are worried about someone sleeping rough, ensure that the person is helped quickly by alerting StreetLink – thestreetlink.org.uk. Call 999 if the person is in immediate danger, needs medical assistance, is under 18 or is with someone who is under 18.



Why this guide?

The 10th of October marks World Homeless Day – a global opportunity to raise awareness of homelessness and the challenges faced by people experiencing it. To support this, we publish practical guides for churches and the wider community, helping people respond to homelessness with confidence and understanding.

For many people facing homelessness or crisis, the church feels like a safe place to turn. But knowing how best to respond isn't always straightforward.

This guide provides practical guidance to help churches support people in ways that are compassionate, consistent and safe. It explains the different forms of homelessness, challenges common myths and misconceptions, and offers advice on working alongside local homelessness organisations and support services to ensure people receive the most appropriate help.

By accessing this guide, your church is helping to create a more informed and joined-up response to homelessness within your community.

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Why homelessness happens

Every person experiencing homelessness has their own story and their own reasons for being in that situation. While we may never know everything they have been through, we can recognise that they are facing extreme hardship and deserve to be treated with compassion. Sometimes, the most meaningful thing you can offer is simply your time – to stop, listen and acknowledge them as a person.

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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



Since 2010, the number of people sleeping rough has increased by 171%.

Source: shelter.org.uk

What are the types of homelessness?

Homelessness takes many forms. In the UK, it is generally categorised as shown below, although however the lines between categories can become blurred.

► 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. 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 usually make up the majority of single homeless people in England.

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.

What can churches do?

Supporting a member of your congregation

Not everyone at risk of homelessness will ask for help. Financial difficulties, relationship breakdown, poor mental health or other life events can quickly place someone at risk, and many people feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about their situation.

Churches can play an important role by creating an environment where people feel able to speak openly before a crisis develops. Regularly reminding your congregation that support is available, providing accessible information and encouraging open conversations can help people seek help sooner.

Be aware of changes that may suggest someone is struggling, such as withdrawing from church activities, expressing concerns about money, mentioning housing problems or appearing unusually anxious or distressed. These signs do not necessarily mean someone is at risk of homelessness, but they can be an opportunity to check in and ask how they are doing.

Practical support can make a significant difference. Offering to help complete forms, make phone calls, attend appointments or signpost someone to local advice and housing services may help them resolve problems before they lose their home.





Helping homeless callers

When someone who is homeless reaches out to your place of worship for help, you may want to have some resources to hand.

At the end of this guide, you'll find a QR code which links to our free resources for churches. 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 people experiencing homelessness 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 people experiencing homelessness.

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

2. Be realistic

Showing kindness to a person who is homeless 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 people experiencing homelessness 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 someone sleeping rough or begging

Seeing someone sleeping rough or begging can leave us with difficult questions. Should we give money? Should we stop and talk? Who should we contact? How can we help without causing unintended harm?

- ▶ **Safety first:** Always consider your own safety before offering help. If someone appears agitated or aggressive, keep your distance and do not approach. If there is an immediate risk to anyone's safety, call 999. Speak in a public place where others are nearby, and never allow someone you do not know into your home or workplace.
- ▶ **Engage in conversation:** Approach the person with kindness and respect. You could ask how they are doing and what their name is. Respect their privacy and listen without judgement.
- ▶ **Listen actively:** Give the person your undivided attention and listen to their story. Avoid making assumptions or judgments.
- ▶ **Be realistic:** Showing kindness to a homeless person can encourage them to make positive changes in their lives. However, you should be honest about the limits of your capacity to help. Above all, try not to be naive about the effects of addiction or mental illness, and keep firm boundaries about what is acceptable.
- ▶ **Offer resources:** Don't give food, clothing or other items to someone without checking whether the items are needed. It's better to ask the person what they need first. You may want to keep small, useful items on you (see page 11 for ideas) and the details of local support services (see page 12). Always check with the person first to find out what they need.



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.

Entrenched rough sleepers

People who have been sleeping rough 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, and may have complex needs that make it difficult to move away from life on the streets.

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 a person from rough sleeping if at all possible.

As members of the public, there is only a limited amount we can do. If someone appears to be in immediate danger or needs urgent support, you should alert the appropriate emergency or outreach services. Above all, treat each person with basic respect and kindness – recognising them first and foremost as a fellow human being.



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.

As of 2026, rough sleeping and passive begging is no longer a criminal offence in England and Wales. However, if someone becomes aggressive when asking for money, report them by using the police 101 service.

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 people who are homeless 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 12 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 MP regarding homelessness in your area. Advocate for policies and programs that address the root causes of homelessness, such as affordable housing and funding for social services. Find contact details for your MP: www.theyworkforyou.com
- 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 people experiencing homelessness, 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 people experiencing homelessness is available from CUF.org.uk and Housingjustice.org.uk

Helplines



General advice

- ▶ Shelter Helpline (England): Open: Mon to Fri, 8am to 5pm. Closed on bank holidays.
- ▶ Shelter Helpline (Cymru): Open: Mon to Fri, 9am to 4pm. Closed on bank holidays.
- ▶ The Citizen's Advice Bureau (England) **0800 144 8848**
- ▶ The Citizen's Advice Bureau (Cymru): **0800 702 2020**

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](https://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



Scan to access our resources.
www.churchhomelesscharity.org.uk



Church Homeless Charity, Queen Mary's Hostel,
28 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1DX
Charity No. 802801
020 7269 1630 info@churchhomelesscharity.org.uk
www.churchhomelesscharity.org.uk