



# Helping someone experiencing homelessness

**A practical guide**



If you are worried about someone sleeping rough, ensure that the person is helped quickly by alerting StreetLink – [thestreetlink.org.uk](https://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?

**Every year, we publish this guide to help anyone who wants an answer to the question 'what can I do to help?' The 10th of October marks World Homeless Day – a global moment to recognise the realities of homelessness.**

Awareness is a vital first step in helping people experiencing homelessness. With this guide, we aim to educate, and dispel myths and preconceptions.

Homelessness takes many forms and looks different for everyone, and this guide aims to explain the types of homelessness – and the different types of support that is beneficial.

While none of us can solve homelessness alone, your willingness to understand the challenges people face and learn how to respond thoughtfully can make a real difference.

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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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by Dryden Goodwin  
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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](https://shelter.org.uk)



# What are the types of homelessness?

Homelessness takes many forms. In the UK, it is generally categorised as shown below, 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

The most visible form of homelessness, but only the tip of the iceberg. It includes people sleeping in parks, train stations, shop doorways and other public places. People who sleep rough may fall outside of the definitions of statutory homelessness and move in and out of temporary accommodation such as hostels.

## ► 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.

# 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 8 for ideas) and the details of local support services (see page 9).



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 someone who is homeless?

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 homeless people and ensure that donations are distributed fairly and safely.

## What if someone asks for money for a place to stay?

We recommend directing someone to the established support services in the area or alerting them yourself via Streetlink. See page 9 for contact information.

## What else can I 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. Educate yourself and others:** Learn more about homelessness and share your knowledge (or this guide!) with others to raise awareness and reduce stigma.
- 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](http://www.theyworkforyou.com)
- 3. Supporting homeless charities and support services:** you can do this through regular donating, fundraising, or leaving money in a will or trust.
- 4. Volunteer your time:** Offer your time to volunteer at shelters, soup kitchens, or other organisations serving people who are homeless.
- 5. Donate food:** People experiencing homelessness rely on foodbanks, sometimes solely, for their food and toiletries. Consider donating items to a food bank in your area (check what items are needed first.) More guidance on how you can help people experiencing homelessness is available from the Homeless Link website – [homeless.org.uk](http://homeless.org.uk)

More guidance on how you can help homeless people is available from the Homeless Link website – [homeless.org.uk](http://homeless.org.uk)

Whatever you do, do something! Homelessness is not inevitable and should not be a fact of life. We can all do our part to end homelessness.



# 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](http://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.

We believe that small actions can have a lasting impact. Thank you for being part of a community that chooses compassion, understanding and practical support for people experiencing homelessness.

**Find more information at  
[www.churchhomelesscharity.org.uk](http://www.churchhomelesscharity.org.uk)**



**Small grants,  
big impact.**



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