

Facts about Homelessness

What is homelessness?

You are deemed to be homeless if you are sleeping rough, if you have to leave where you live (eg you are squatting, living with friends or in temporary accommodation), or if your home is unsuitable (eg overcrowded, has damp which is affecting your health or you are in an abusive relationship).

Causes

Homeless people can be any age, gender, race or financial background. They may have been evicted, lost their job, have mental health issues or be dependent on drugs or alcohol. They may be escaping from a failed relationship or have fallen out with family. Lack of affordable housing¹ may be another cause, along with cuts in welfare. People who leave prison, the army, care or hospital may not have that basic human right – a roof over their head.

What is being done

Local councils have a duty to help those in priority need, such as families with children, victims of an emergency such as fire or the vulnerable. However, they have no duty towards those who are intentionally homeless, whatever the reason. Some charities, especially in cold weather, provide emergency accommodation which is secure and warm with free meals, clothing and washing facilities. They also offer advice and support to help people get back on their feet.

The future

There are no statistics to show how many people are homeless in the UK. While rough sleepers can be counted, there are also the 'hidden' homeless who sleep on friends' sofas, in hostels or squats. Local councils are being asked to do more, though how this will be funded is unclear. What is clear is that homelessness is on the increase and its causes need to be addressed urgently.

¹Affordable housing refers to housing that is affordable by that section of society whose income is below the average household income.

Life on the Streets

Journalist Ed Baker spent a night on the streets to see what life means for rough sleepers.

After a night sleeping rough in a cardboard box, I felt lucky that I was only spending one night sleeping rough. Posing as a homeless person meant that I'd had to go several days without washing, wear a hotchpotch of mis-matched, dirty clothes (mainly to keep me warm) and shed the comforts that people with a roof over their heads take for granted.

Underneath the railway bridge, on both sides of the road, were piles of bedding, beneath which people slept, despite the hubbub of passing traffic and pedestrians. I gingerly joined the end of a row. Initially, I was ignored. My disguise seemed to have worked.

In the early hours of the morning it started to rain. The worst part of the night's experience was discovering that my cardboard box wasn't waterproof.

However, the night was mild and, as I learned later from a 'fellow' sleeper, Trevor, rough sleepers are threatened by much worse in the night – thugs, rats, dogs, physical and verbal

abuse, and theft from other rough sleepers – as Trevor himself said, “There's no camaraderie* on the streets”.



My sketch of Trevor

At 10pm, members of a local charity arrived with hot soup. Gratefully, I curled my fingers round the polystyrene cup, mindful that for rough sleepers this was a lifeline. I'd had a good lunch. I felt rather guilty.

In the morning I ditched my cardboard box in the nearest bin and went home, painfully aware that what I had experienced was far from the suffering of people who have no place to go **but** the streets.

*Mutual trust and friendship between people sharing the same experience.

Text 3

Town Hall, Risford, RF1 0PJ

Date as postmark.

Mr Stephen Wilkins MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Wilkins

It is with regret that I find myself obliged to write to you, Risford's local MP, to request your assistance in addressing the desperate problem that the local council has with homelessness.

In the town centre, some 50 people sleep rough every night. The council is aware that the number of hidden homeless is also increasing, though the statistics are unknown. The council has for a long time had a duty of care for those in priority need, whose plight is often pitiful. However, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 now requires us to do more to prevent homelessness. It is unclear how. Rough sleepers can be counted, as can people who frequently change their address, but those threatened with homelessness are harder to identify.

Of course, many homeless people are referred to us by, for example, prisons or social services. However, these people can choose the area they wish to live in. This is impractical for the council. We have to prioritise those with a local connection.

Above all, how can government possibly expect councils to budget for this and **still** maintain public services, when their budgets have been cut year after year?

As our local MP, I urge you to raise this issue in parliament. It is a national crisis and should be funded by the government, not by local rates.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Edward Jennings

Edward Jennings
Town Councillor