Toolkit: Rough Sleeping in and around Churches

What should we do if someone is rough sleeping in our churchyard or church grounds?

If someone has found themselves needing to sleep rough, it is almost certainly because they are dealing with complex issues. This might be to do with mental health, relationship breakdown, immigration status, the experience of trauma, addiction, and/or a combination of all the above.

First, the key thing to remember is that they are a person before they are a problem. They are humans made in the image of God; so, it follows that any response from a church addressing someone who is rough sleeping should hold that amid their response. However, it is also worth acknowledging that addressing a situation where someone is rough sleeping can be difficult, especially if they are on church grounds and/or unwilling to move. Therefore, clear boundaries and wisdom alongside compassion are needed.

How do we best help someone?

If you have discovered someone sleeping rough, especially if the weather is cold, you may want to offer warm blankets, food, hot drinks. Or, if the church is open and it is safe to do so, offer them shelter inside.

However, the **very best help** for them is to get them into some sort of temporary accommodation and engaging with a professional homelessness support service.

Helping the person rough sleeping to move on **quickly** is **always** the best option, both for you as a church and for the person sleeping rough.

- If someone is **new to the streets**, the sooner they can find somewhere to stay (even if temporary) the less likelihood that they will fall into longer term homelessness

- However, most people you will encounter will be **those who have been rough sleeping for a while,** who are known to the authorities, and who have complex needs.

- If they are 'entrenched' (have longer term experience of rough sleeping), the best cause of action is to find out which other homelessness agencies/ charities/authorities have been involved with them, and where you can refer them. It can be quite a complex picture to piece together their story and history, so the sooner you begin that process the better.

What steps should I take?

1. Find out a bit more

If you feel able, talk to the person and establish their situation.
If the person is in serious medical emergency, danger or under 18, call 999 immediately.

If the person is able to talk to you (i.e. if they are not asleep, if they speak the same language and are not under the influence of drink or drugs), and you feel safe to so do, say hello, introduce yourself and find out about a bit more about them.

Start by building trust: this person will likely have dealt with trauma in their past, so being mindful of a trauma-informed approach is important.

Some helpful tips:

- Don't ask their name or personal details straight away
- Food /drink/hospitality can work well
    - You could just introduce yourself and ask if they would like a cup of tea or coffee; this is a simple and non-threatening way to start
- Show care and be friendly without sounding like you are interrogating them
- If a person is sleeping and you need to wake them up, a good tip is to tap their foot. It provides space to keep them, and you, safe.

You may encounter some hostility /suspicion; they have probably answered a lot of questions repeatedly every time they have engaged with anyone trying to help and may well have encountered judgement and possibly violence.

Good questions to ask might be:

- How long have you been sleeping out?
- When did you last eat?
- Is this your local area? Do you know it very well?
- Do you have any family or friends nearby?

2. Offer help, but ask their permission

Once you've established trust, you can then see if they will share some personal details with you- their name, situation etc.
Ask them if you can share this information and location, to get help from either Streetlink or Housing Justice. **It's important to get their consent to share data.**

Be clear that you want to help; explain that you will be engaging with support services as you are not equipped to do so.

Be clear also about your own boundaries: what you can do and what you will not do. For example:

- *"We can bring you some hot food this evening"*
- *"I can get in touch with Street Link or Housing Justice with your permission"*
- *"You cannot stay here long term"*
- *"I cannot sort housing out for you or let you sleep in the church"*

3. Raise a StreetLink 'Alert'

With their permission, you can record their location through Streetlink. This is a website that sends an alert to the relevant local authority street sleeping outreach team who will try and visit.

You can raise an alert at**: https://thestreetlink.org.uk/**

So long as you know the road/postcode where the person is sleeping, you can enter an alert. If you are able, the more details you can give the better (e.g. what they are wearing, what they have with them, and any personal details you have obtained with consent). This will speed up the response from the local authority to help find them and offer appropriate help.

The local authority outreach team should then come out and try to find the person and offer to triage to local support services. These services are often massively overstretched and under-resourced, so you may need to be persistent if you don't get a response immediately.

4. Check the 'CHAIN' data from Housing Justice charity

If you have tried to contact Streetlink and have got nowhere, you can access something called CHAIN data.

There is a London wide multi-agency database called **CHAIN** (**C**ombined **H**omelessness **A**nd **I**nformation **N**etwork). CHAIN records information about people sleeping rough and the wider street population in London, commissioned and funded by the Mayor of London and managed by Homeless Link.

Accessing CHAIN data about the person you have encountered can be helpful in ensuring next steps are right for them, and **that you are not starting from scratch**. It provides information about their background, and their history of engagement with a considerable scope of homelessness services.

Many agencies have access to CHAIN data, including local authority outreach teams. For churches, **we can also contact Housing Justice (see below)** who have access to CHAIN data and understand church context specifically.

It may be from this CHAIN information that you can contact a support worker, housing provider or charity they are already or have been engaged with directly, which is often the quickest way of getting them back into the help they need.

Housing Justice are a Christian charity who have worked with churches around homelessness in London for many years. They are happy to be contacted to draw on CHAIN information whenever possible and relevant, to help understand what might be happening for any given person who has come to be rough sleeping.

You can contact Housing Justice at: info@housingjustice.org.uk and lead your message with "FAO Mark Brennan"

5. Contact your Local Authority Rough Sleeping Team directly

If steps **3** and **4** have not resulted in contact for the person sleeping rough by a homelessness support organisation who can help them, the next step is to contact the local authority directly.

Every local authority should have a **Rough Sleeping Reduction Plan or Strategy** (see Appendix 1 for links to the Plan for each Local Authority in the Diocese of London). This sets out the local authority strategy for tackling rough sleeping, and what resources they are committing to it. In these Plans, you should find contact details or a person or team to get in touch with, to let them know of someone rough sleeping in the borough.

They should advise you on what to do next, e.g. give times and location of where the person sleeping rough needs to go to engage with housing team, or explain what services are on offer and how they can be accessed. You may need more details of the person sleeping rough to determine what immediate support they are entitled to/eligible for (e.g. gender, age, vulnerability etc).

6. Contact your local Ward Councillor

If you are struggling to get a response from local authority support services, you can contact your local councillor. They are your elected representative to the local council and can enquire on your behalf about what is being done to support this person. You can find your **Ward Councillor** on your local authority website.

You can ask your local Councillor if they are familiar with the Rough Sleeping Reduction Plan for their local authority, as it may be useful for them to reference it.

7. Let the Diocesan Parish Property Support Team know

If you are concerned about church property or are unclear who owns the land that the person is rough sleeping on, you can contact the Diocese of London Parish Property Support Team
Your first point of contact is to email ppsinfo@london.anglican.org

This is particularly important if the situation becomes complex e.g.

- It is a closed church or one that is managed by the diocesan property team
- Those rough sleeping are in/near a building in disrepair
- There is a large accumulation of belongings
- There is someone rough sleeping near a church hall with public access need/ leased out (e.g. used for a nursery or day centre)
- The person/people rough sleeping are unwilling to move on, and you need to explore legal action

Some issues you may face:

The person sleeping rough may behave in erratic or problematic ways or may be abusive.

They may refuse help, and you may get a conflicting picture of whether they have been offered help in the past, if you compare notes with other agencies.

They may have been let down on numerous occasions and/or have a trauma response which means trust is difficult of any organisation, particularly statutory ones.

There may be public health/hygiene considerations depending on how long they have been there.

There may be needles broken glass or other unsanitary items lying around which could be dangerous for you to handle. Your local council should have a sharps team who can come and remove safely.

There may be neighbours to the church who find the rough sleeping a problem and may be complaining to you or to others.

If it is a closed church, please contact the Diocesan Parish Property Support Team (details above).

Either the person sleeping rough, or others locally may expect that because you are a church, you are going to "be kind" and look after them and let them sleep there. There sometimes is a layer of spiritual manipulation (e.g. "I thought you Christians were meant to love your neighbour").

Who is responsible for someone who is rough sleeping?

While we all as Christians have a duty to care for those in distress (as Jesus asked in the parable of the Good Samaritan: "who is my neighbour?") we cannot do everything! We may often be called to be the in-between person to get them to someone who can genuinely help.

There are those that have a statutory duty to provide support. In most cases, someone rough sleeping is under the responsibility of **Local Authority.** Under the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017), Local Authorities have a Code of Guidance of what they should do to meet this Act.

Generally, Local Authorities have a responsibility to:

- Provide temporary accommodation to households that may meet the criteria for the main homelessness duty.
- Meet the needs of people who are present in their area and have no settled residence.
- Implement "Severe Weather Emergency Plans" (SWEP) when temperatures are expected to fall to zero degrees Celsius or below for three or more consecutive nights.

However, there may be cases where the Local Authority will state that they do not have this responsibility, e.g. if the person has refused to engage with services or has been offered housing in the past and has refused to live there.

If you are a borough in the Greater London Authority (GLA), the Mayor of London also has the "Life off the Street" **programme** with a plan of action to end rough sleeping by 2030. Within this, it states that every local authority in the GLA should have a "Rough Sleeping Reduction Plan" or similar.
(In Spelthorne, which is not part of the GLA, the council rough sleeping policy is here)

It is also important to note that the enormous housing crisis we all face is most acute in London. Local Authorities in London are beyond stretched when it comes to providing housing, no matter what their statutory duty. In fact, many are close to bankruptcy caused in a large degree to the amount they are spending on temporary accommodation. There needs to be some realism that there are no easy solutions at the moment.

Should I take someone in?

From a safeguarding perspective, we do not advise taking the person into a clergy home, or the home of someone in your church.

- Without knowing the person and their history, and without a relationship of trust, it could put both parties at risk.

- It is very likely they have trauma in their past, so building relationships of trust will not be straightforward and will take time.

- It may harm the person's case to secure and appropriate housing longer term as they could be deemed to be "suitably housed".

There are various charities that run organised hosting schemes for people who may find themselves homeless. Through these schemes checks, matching happens, and safe boundaries are established. Those who are experiencing homelessness can be referred into such schemes, and if you feel moved to offer space to someone who is homeless, perhaps you could consider one of these schemes?

The Diocese of London partners with Housing Justice on their migrant homelessness projects. These projects can offer a safe placement for those going through the asylum process or who are refugees who would otherwise be street homeless. If you want to know more about this, get in touch with the Compassionate Communities Team, or you can read more here.

How do we deal with anti-social behaviour?

Often, rough sleeping comes along with complex issues that may have led to homelessness initially or has been exacerbated by the experience of having to sleep rough.

If the person is behaving in an anti-social way, either abusive language, behaviour, violence, using drugs or alcohol, or e.g. is defecating/urinating on the land, damaging the building, or is hoarding possessions, then you need to get others involved. Contact your local community policing team for advice.

If they are becoming violent and are likely to be a threat to others, please call 999. **Do not try to intervene and/or restrain them and ensure your own safety.**

How can we be mindful of safeguarding concerns?

- While it is heartbreaking to see someone sleeping rough, **do not offer** to take them into your home to sleep
- If you want to chat and build relationship, and you feel it is safe to do so, aim to chat outdoors, or take them to a local café or public place. If you can find someone else who can also be around, that is wise.
- Do not promise anything you cannot deliver on and be careful about what support you can offer. Be clear about boundaries and what you can and cannot do.
- Do not offer money.
- If you witness/suspect that the person may have addiction issues/are under the influence of drugs or drink, be wise about how you engage, as they may behave erratically. Be mindful of your own personal safety, and don't get too close if you don't feel safe to.
- If they are getting agitated or angry, give them room. Don't try to argue back. If needed, walk away.
- It's not wise to initiate any physical contact (hug, touching arm or shoulder) unless they invite it; equally if they ask for physical contact and you don't feel safe to do so, decline.

Key contacts

- **Within the Diocese of London:**
    - Parish Property Support Team – ppsinfo@london.anglican.org/ **020 3837 5076**
    - Compassionate Communities Team- compassionate.communites@london.anglican.org / **020 3837 5104**

- **Housing Justice** for homelessness advice: info@housingjustice.org.uk and lead your message with "FAO Mark Brennan".

- Your **Local Authority** (Rough Sleeping Reduction Strategies/Webpages for each Borough are in the Appendix).

Key resources

- **Streetlink** website is here

- **Atlas of London's Homelessness Services | Atlas:** an interactive website to provide a clear overview of homelessness services in London, produced by London Housing Foundation.

- **Housing Justice report: "Many Rooms"** (2022: a really good introduction to churches work with those who are homeless. A helpful flow chart from this report about triaging is included as Appendix 2.

- The Mayor of London's **Life Off the Streets Programme** details are **here.**

  If you would like support or training in navigating this topic or anything adjacent to this, please get in contact with the Compassionate Communities team – compassionate.communites@london.anglican.org

APPENDIX 1:

Homelessness Reduction Strategies/Plans by Local Authority

(April 2025)

Barnet

Brent

Camden

City of London

Ealing

Enfield

Kensington & Chelsea

Hackney

Hammersmith & Fulham

Haringey

Harrow

Hillingdon

Hounslow

Islington

Richmond

Spelthorne

Tower Hamlets

Westminster

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APPENDIX 2:

Flow chart for Homelessness Support

(Reproduced with permission from 'Many Rooms' Report from Housing Justice 2022. Printable version here)

