

# CARRYING OUT A COUNT



## USING THIS GUIDANCE

In order to decide whether there is a rough sleeping problem that could usefully be measured via a rough sleeping count, local authorities are advised to undertake the estimation exercise set out in the guidance on Consulting Locally and Estimating (which can be found at <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>) outlined by Homeless Link or alternatively gain intelligence from the suggested list of local organisations also set out in this guidance document.

Where local authorities have decided to count, it is expected that counts will be undertaken using the DCLG guidance and Homeless Link toolkit. This will mean that count figures are more accurate and consistent and can reasonably be compared across regions, local authority areas and over time.

A count is a snapshot of the number of rough sleepers in a local authority area on a particular night. Therefore, it will not record everyone in the area with a history of rough sleeping. However, it can be an effective means of gauging the scale of the problem and monitoring progress over time.

Given that rough sleepers often move between local authorities (particularly in urban areas) it is strongly recommended that neighbouring authorities count on the same night whenever possible. This eliminates double counting and ensures that more mobile rough sleepers are not missed. Where more than one authority in a region or sub-region is planning to count, making arrangements to count regionally or sub-regionally on the same night is encouraged.

## WHO WILL LEAD ON PLANNING A COUNT?

Each local authority will need a lead responsible for managing the whole evaluation. The lead may also delegate the detailed management of the rough sleeping count to a Count Coordinator, who will usually be the local authority rough sleeping coordinator.

It is important however to involve a range of agencies working with people sleeping rough in the area. Their differing knowledge and expertise will ensure a wider range of reliable information. The Count Coordinator may want to set up a small working group to facilitate this process.

A template checklist for Count Coordinators is available at: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>.

## WHEN WILL THE COUNT TAKE PLACE?

It is estimated that a rough sleeping count will take a minimum of six weeks to plan properly. This will give local authorities time to gather intelligence from partners, organise volunteers, plan the night's activities, liaise with the police and obtain a verifier.

Formal rough sleeping counts should be undertaken between 01 October and 30 November. Local authorities may choose to count more often than this but Department for Communities and Local Government will only collate figures from autumn counts. The single figure needs to be submitted by 16 December. The count must take place on a single night as if spread over two or more nights there will be doubts about whether some people have been counted twice. Local authorities no longer have to notify DCLG that they intend to carry out a count with the proposed date, but areas will require a trained count verifier – see 'organising a count verifier' below.

In choosing a date it is important to take into account the following:

- Avoid a night when unusual local factors may distort the numbers, such as events, festivals, higher levels of police activity or changes to service opening times
- Identify an appropriate day of the week: choosing a weekend may mean that people bed down later or are less visible. Also take into account whether key days during the week,

such as those on which benefits are collected, may also provide a false picture of the average levels of rough sleeping in the area.

Particularly extreme weather conditions may impact on numbers. If a period of extreme weather coincides with the rough sleeper count, then the Count Coordinator, in consultation with the verifier, may decide to postpone the count, submit an estimate based on a single night where cold weather provision or severe weather emergency protocols are not in force, or take into account the impact the weather has on the number of rough sleepers when using this information to inform local planning.

### **Start and finish times**

It is important that start times are tailored to meet local circumstances. The earliest permitted start time is midnight. It is sensible for counts to start at 2:00am in cities and towns so as to ensure that rough sleepers who bed down later in these busier areas are still counted. Counts should be completed by 5:00am but may be conducted around dawn and extended to 7:00am in rural areas where the majority of people are sleeping rough away from built-up and well-lit areas. In most cases, if appropriate intelligence has been gathered and enough volunteers recruited, counts will take no more than 2 to 3 hours to conduct.

### **WHO WILL CARRY OUT THE COUNT?**

#### **Recruiting counters**

Many local authorities look for volunteers within their own workforce (with time off in lieu or overtime being awarded) as well as looking for volunteer counters from the local voluntary sector or faith groups.

If local authorities would like to ensure that local churches are consulted as part of the estimate or count, they can contact Alison Gelder at Housing Justice on [a.gelder@housingjustice.org.uk](mailto:a.gelder@housingjustice.org.uk).

All those involved in the count should be thoroughly briefed about how to keep themselves safe, about who to count and about how to record the details of anyone found rough sleeping.

A briefing note for counters is available at: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>.

#### **Organising a count verifier**

Official counts need to be verified in order to ensure that they have been carried out safely and in accordance with this guidance. Verifiers are trained and supported by Homeless Link. They are volunteers drawn from our membership, other local providers, and the local community.

To book a trained verifier, local authorities should email Homeless Link via [verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk) at least one month before the planned count date.

Homeless Link will issue separate guidance on verification to each verifier.

### **WHO WILL BE COUNTED?**

In 2010 the Government widened the definition of rough sleeping and when estimating or counting it is essential that those included in the count figure fall into the following definition:

*People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or "bashes").*

The definition does not include people in hostels or shelters, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes or organised protest, squatters or travellers.

It does not include people who were rough sleeping in the area on a previous night or earlier in the evening but who were not there at the time of the count. It does not include people wandering around or empty sleeping sites.

Bedded down is taken to mean either lying down or sleeping. About to bed down includes those who are sitting in/on or standing next to a sleeping bag or other bedding. The intention is to establish that they are or will be rough sleeping on the night of the count. Research has found that in many areas people seen drinking in the street or begging (even if they have a blanket or a sleeping bag) are not necessarily sleeping rough and they should not be included unless they are clearly bedded down or about to bed down at the time of the count.

All those who fall into this definition should be counted, regardless of nationality or eligibility for public funds.

## WHERE WILL THE COUNT COVER?

### **Deciding on the area over which to carry out a count**

At present counts are done by all different types of councils, but mostly at city or borough/district level or by unitary authorities. There are some examples of county-wide street counts. It is good practice to liaise with neighbouring areas to reduce double counting or to organise to count on the same night over a county or wider sub-regional area.

### **Making the best use of resources to cover the area**

It is not necessary to cover every street or park in any local authority area. With the limited resources available it is better to focus efforts on areas that rough sleepers are known to use. The following information is designed to help local areas to get the best possible coverage:

- Local authorities need to identify from the prior intelligence exercise above sections or neighbourhoods of the local authority area where people sleeping rough are likely to be found. It is much more effective to concentrate on a thorough search of areas known to be used by people sleeping rough.
- Count Coordinators will need to divide the areas being counted into segments and produce clearly delineated maps indicating the areas to be covered by separate teams of counters. Agree exact boundaries to the segments, identifying individual streets and parts of streets, and draw them on a map. It is important to be precise about boundaries in order to avoid either missing areas or double counting them.
- Wherever possible, the areas covered should be well known to the teams and individual counters. The most effective counters are those with a knowledge of where people are likely to be sleeping rough in that area, for example workers from local outreach teams, night shelters, day centres or soup runs. If it is necessary to recruit a wider range of volunteers, try to team them up with a worker with knowledge of local rough sleeping.
- It is essential to plan ahead to gain access to non-public areas (e.g. hospital or college grounds) on the night of the count if these are places where rough sleepers may be bedded down.

There are particular challenges in ensuring that particular areas and people are included in the count:

**Rural areas:** It is logistically more difficult to carry out an accurate single-night count in large rural areas than in urban areas. The area to cover is greater and there is a wide range of possible locations for people sleeping rough, from hillsides and woods to tents, caves and beach shelters. In rural areas there are more likely to be individual people sleeping rough on sites on their own and these may be spread out over a large area. In such authorities those carrying out the count cannot cover all possible sites and will be forced to concentrate on locations where people are most likely to be found sleeping rough and on local knowledge. There also may be people sleeping rough on

private property such as barns or on farm land which cannot be accessed without prior permission, and so are excluded from the count.

**Urban areas:** In cities and large towns it is easier to carry out a single-night count, as those sleeping rough will be concentrated within a relatively small area and tend to congregate in groups. However, there may be other challenges. There may be people out on the streets having left late night pubs and clubs which can make it difficult to assess the number of actual rough sleepers. There are also safety issues involved in entering some of the possible locations for those sleeping rough such as derelict buildings and building sites.

**Underrepresentation of particular groups:** There has been historic concern that a number of groups risk being underrepresented in rough sleeping figures.<sup>1</sup> For example, women are often “hidden homeless” and undercounted in rough sleeping counts. Women may be very vulnerable when sleeping rough (from assault and exploitation)<sup>2</sup>, and as a result tend to use more secluded or (perceived) secure locations to sleep when living on the streets. Likewise, women may be more likely to sleep in the day to avoid the greater perceived risks of sleeping during the night. Counters, for understandable safety reasons, are often not permitted to go into ‘risky’ areas (e.g. some dark alleyways or unlocked doorways), but these are the places those most vulnerable are likely to have concealed themselves. The involvement of police in street counts where this may be an issue will be crucial.

**Underrepresentation of rough sleepers on public transport:** Counts are likely to miss rough sleepers using public transport as a place to sleep. Particularly in the winter and in metropolitan areas, there is likely to be a significant proportion of rough sleepers taking refuge on warmer buses, trains, trams or tubes.<sup>3</sup>

## CARRYING OUT RECONNAISSANCE

Following receipt of evidence from local partners, the Count Coordinator should arrange a reconnaissance of the area over a period of a few days, to identify possible sites where people might sleep rough. This exercise might identify non-public areas such as hospital or college grounds where it will be necessary to liaise with the owners over gaining access. While undertaking reconnaissance, you should not tell people sleeping rough about the count, as this can arouse suspicion and discourage people from sleeping in their normal places.

## HOW WILL THE COUNT WORK?

### Safety considerations

Local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the safety of all those involved in undertaking a rough sleeping count is assured at all times. Local authorities should balance the need to keep all involved safe with the need to gather as much good information about rough sleepers as possible.

In order to get this balance right, local authorities should undertake the following:

- Give clear local guidance to counters about whether or not to wake up any unknown/new rough sleepers found during the count in order to get information from them that might be helpful in finding solutions or shaping the local response to rough sleeping. Please note that extra detail beyond the single count figure is not required by DCLG.
- Organise the count so that counters work in teams of at least two and have relevant equipment available to use (e.g. torches, phones). Care should be taken to ensure that an awareness of the whereabouts of counters is maintained at all times.

<sup>1</sup> Communities and Local Government (2008) *Rough Sleeping 10 Years On: From the streets to independent living and opportunity* - Executive Summary, p.4. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/roughsleepingdiscussionresponse>

<sup>2</sup> Jones, A. (1999) *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Experiences of Homeless Women* produced by Centre for Housing Policy (University of York) and Crisis. Available at: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/women.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Twinch, E. (2010) *Charity targets bendy bus rough sleepers*. Inside Housing. Available at: <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/charity-targets-bendy-bus-rough-sleepers/6508658.article>

- If there are any areas in which counters do not feel safe counting, or the local authority has intelligence about them, then they should be told not to enter.
- Local police should be asked to assist with counts and are often willing to do so. Having police officers available on the night means that there are more options available around waking up unknown/new rough sleepers to get information from them that will assist the teams in finding them solutions to their rough sleeping.
- A safe initial meeting and debriefing venue should be arranged, such as a local authority building or day centre, where counters can meet and return to once they have completed their section. There should be clear arrangements for getting to and accessing this building.
- Arrangements should be made in advance for the safe transport home of counters, by taxi if necessary. If it is decided that the count will start later, then the organisers may need to consider safe transportation to the venue for the initial meeting too.
- Counters should also be asked to carry identification and be given a letter from the local authority explaining their purpose in being out late at night.
- On the night of the count, the relevant local authority officer should go through the safety procedures (e.g. when to call in, how to respond to emergencies, when to leave an area, how to deal with any aggression or anger from rough sleepers or others) carefully with counters and ensure that it is understood.

A health and safety checklist for counters is available at: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>.

### **Briefing the counters**

All counters should have been issued with the 'Guidance for counters.' Counters should understand the purpose of the project and how to go about it. In particular they should understand:

- The definition of sleeping rough
- The importance of recording each individual separately if the local authority is keen to record details to aid local planning (DCLG only require a single figure)

All those involved in the count should be thoroughly briefed about how to keep themselves safe, about who to count and about how to record the details of anyone found rough sleeping. Counters should be provided with the information for counters, a supply of the Rough Sleeping Count Forms (available at <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>) or a locally developed alternative and maps of the exact area they are covering. Counters should also be provided with an identification letter describing briefly what they are doing.

### **Interventions on the night**

It is strongly recommended that prior arrangements are made to ensure that there are emergency beds available for people found on the count who express the desire to move off the streets.

### **Recording the data**

On the night of the count, local authorities can use the updated Rough Sleeping Count Form (based on the Form A used for counts prior to the 2010 guidance and available at: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/effective-action/evaluating-rough-sleeping>) or can devise a form for local use if required. Please note that only one figure is required, although the local authority may ask counters to collect particular data about individuals, trends or hotspots in order to inform local planning.

- Counters should record each individual person on a separate line on the form rather than simply write totals on the form as this is impossible to verify as an accurate record.
- Information about each rough sleeper may be recorded from previous knowledge of the person and their sleeping site.
- If an individual is not known, and where it is safe to do so, the counter should attempt to wake each individual to record their details. If it is not possible to do this at the least gender, broad ethnic origin and an estimate of age can be recorded from observations where people sleeping rough are visible. Even if the counter cannot observe, or establish, any details about the individual (for example because they are unable to wake them and they are covered up) they should still record them individually. It may be helpful to request the assistance of the local police in waking individuals who counters are unable to wake.
- It is important to try and establish the identity of a rough sleeper on the night of the count as this will help with follow-up and referrals following the count.
- It may be advisable to collate information about the number of individuals sleeping rough who do not have recourse to public funds and are therefore unable to be moved off the streets, for communication to DCLG, UKBA or Reconnection Services. The nationality can be recorded in the Rough Sleeping Count form. However all people recorded and verified on the form will be included in the total outcome of the count.

As Counters are likely to come across people who do not speak English as their first language, a language ID chart that can enable a rough sleeper to point at their native language can be found on the Refugee Council Website and copies should be provided for all counters:

[http://languages.refugeecouncil.org.uk/top\\_navigation/Language\\_ID\\_chart.htm](http://languages.refugeecouncil.org.uk/top_navigation/Language_ID_chart.htm)

- Details on individuals should be kept strictly confidential and not revealed to anyone outside of the project team. It is also important to give as much information as possible on the location of people sleeping rough, as this may help with the future planning of services. The forms must be completed on the night of the count and returned to the Count Coordinator on that night.

### **Submitting the data**

Each pair of counters will record rough sleepers using this form and the Count Coordinator, overseen by the count verifier, will calculate the figure from all the forms returned on the night.

Local authorities should use the single figure to complete the DCLG rough sleeping statistics form and email completed forms to [roughsleepingstatistics@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:roughsleepingstatistics@communities.gsi.gov.uk) by 16 December.

### **Avoiding publicity**

It is advisable only to share the date of the count with those that need to know and to ask them to be discreet. Publicity can worry some people sleeping rough and they may avoid their usual areas on the night if they know a count is taking place.