

Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates

Guide for Local Authorities 2026

Since autumn 2010, all local authorities have been required to submit an annual snapshot figure to MHCLG to indicate the number of people sleeping rough in their area on a 'typical' night between 1st October and 30th November.

Local authority leads and snapshot estimate coordinators should follow this guidance to plan and execute their annual rough sleeping snapshot estimate and have its quality assured by Homeless Link ready for online submission of this data to MHCLG by Friday 11th December, 2026 at the latest.

Please note: Quality Assurance for count-based estimates will be carried out remotely again this year.

The quality assurance processes are set out in the relevant sections below and information will be provided in the weekly project updates. If you are the local authority lead and/or snapshot estimate coordinator for your area and are not receiving project update newsletters, please contact the Homeless Link Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimate Coordinator on verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk to be added to the mailing list.

In this document you will find

This guidance provides a full explanation of everything local authorities need to know to successfully carry out a rough sleeping snapshot estimate, including information about where how to access video explainers and other helpful documents.

The below areas are covered:

- A glossary of useful terms
- Information about Q&A sessions
- Why snapshot estimates?
- A very brief overview
- Homeless Link's role
- Collecting demographic information
- Local Authority mergers
- Definition of rough sleeping
- Deciding which approach to follow
- Changing your approach
- Working with partner agencies
- Involving independent partners
- The count-based estimate approach
- The evidence-based estimate approach
- Including a spotlight count
- Tips on intelligence gathering
- Useful forms and other resources
- Where to count and challenges to consider
- Some common snapshot scenarios and solutions
- Using DELTA to submit your return

Glossary

To help local authorities navigate the rough sleeping snapshot estimates process, Homeless Link have created a glossary of the most useful and important terms associated with the project. You can find this glossary on the on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

Weekly Q&A Sessions

You can ask questions, check your understanding of the new quality assurance process for count-based estimates, and explore any other element of the rough sleeping snapshot estimates at the Q&A Sessions for Local Authorities.

The sessions run between late August and early November 2026, and full information and booking links will be sent out with the weekly project updates. If you are the local authority lead and/or snapshot estimate coordinator for your area and are not receiving project update newsletters, please contact the Homeless Link Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimate Coordinator on verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk to be added to the mailing list.

Why use snapshot estimates?

MHCLG currently collects monthly management information about the support provided for people sleeping rough and those at risk of sleeping rough from all local authorities across England. This data is collected on DELTA via the Rough Sleeping Monthly Survey.

In addition, the Rough Sleeping Data Framework was launched across all local authorities in England in May 2023. It includes monthly rough sleeping snapshot estimates for all local authority areas. This information gives a fuller picture of the dynamic and seasonal nature of rough sleeping, and illustrates the work done by local authorities to provide a pathway off the streets and into long-term accommodation. However, these data are not subject to the same quality assurance and certification processes that are part of the annual autumn rough sleeping snapshot estimates.

This means that a dedicated systematic and consistent approach is needed to get comparable, real-time rough sleeping snapshot figures from every local authority in England. The approach used since 2010 is to collect national rough sleeping statistics using a snapshot approach where each local authority chooses one 'typical' night and follows the same guidance.

A snapshot records only those people seen or thought to be sleeping rough on a single 'typical' night. It does not include everyone in an area with a history of sleeping rough, or everyone sleeping rough in areas across the October-November period. The process depends on local agencies having, and sharing, intelligence about who is sleeping rough and where. This can be a challenge because patterns of rough sleeping often fluctuate, for example as people move between sheltered and unsheltered homelessness; in and out of prison and hospital; into and out of relationships; and as the availability of housing, support and income fluctuates. The process also offers an

opportunity to improve partnerships and responses, especially for those areas seeing an increase in people sleeping rough.

A very brief overview

If you are new to the rough sleeping snapshot estimates, the process can seem daunting. To help local authorities, partner agencies, independent partners and other volunteers get a simple overview of the rough sleeping snapshot estimates and what they entail, Homeless Link have created a 7-minute briefing, which is a very quick visual overview of the process. You can find the 7-minute briefing on the on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage. Please do share it with your colleagues, partners and volunteers.

What are the snapshot estimate approaches?

Local authorities can arrive at their snapshot by using one of three approaches:

1. **Count-based estimate** with a full physical count of visible rough sleeping
2. **Evidence-based estimate** meeting using evidence from different partner agencies, which may include people in hidden rough sleeping sites
3. **Evidence-based estimate, including a spotlight count** using evidence from different partner agencies. This includes a physical count of areas with visible rough sleeping alongside evidence for other locations (discussed during an estimate meeting), which may include people in hidden rough sleeping sites.

All the above approaches record only those people seen or thought to be sleeping rough on a single 'typical' night. They do not include everyone in an area with a history of sleeping rough, or everyone sleeping rough in areas across the October-November period.

The annual rough sleeping snapshot allows local authorities to track progress, consider whether current measures are effective in tackling rough sleeping and if new approaches are needed. MHCLG produces a statistical release based on the data each year.

You will find a full explanation of each of the approaches below. They are also set out on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit 'Carrying out your approach'](#) webpage along with explainer videos.

What is Homeless Link's role?

Homeless Link's role is to:

- Publish a toolkit that supports local authorities to produce the most accurate snapshot using one of the three approaches
- Provide support to local authorities in planning and carrying out the data collection. This includes additional support and in-person quality assurance for any local authorities whose previous rough sleeping snapshot estimate is RAG

rated Amber or Red (see section on Quality Assurance below for more information).

- Ensure rough sleeping snapshot meet the required quality assurance standards
- Provide training and support to Quality Assurance Verifiers
- Cross-check the data submitted by local authorities to MHCLG with the numbers Homeless Link has verified for each local authority (the single figure of people sleeping rough and demographic information)

Local authorities should appoint a lead person to oversee the process and liaise with Homeless Link's Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator for support and to arrange quality assurance: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Deadline for submitting snapshot estimates

Once the quality assurance process has been carried out by Homeless Link, local authorities must submit their snapshot estimate and demographic information using the MHCLG DELTA online system. You can find further information on how to set up your account and submit the data to the online system [here](#) and also on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage. Data must be submitted to MHCLG by Friday 11th December 2026.

Collecting demographic data

The rough sleeping snapshot collects demographic data on the numbers of women, men, under-18s, under-25s, over-25s, and UK and non-UK nationals represented among people sleeping rough. It is the responsibility of local authorities to submit aggregate data to MHCLG on the DELTA online system, alongside their final figure for the snapshot estimate. MHCLG will publish the data.

All local authorities in England are required to submit this information to central government, as outlined in the [Single Data List](#).

Where demographic information is not known (for example, because someone was asleep when seen), this should be noted for each category as 'not known'. The demographic data is collected as an indication of the representation of particular groups among people who are sleeping rough. There is no requirement for people sleeping rough to share their information for the purpose of these statistics, as 'not known' can be used instead.

The 'not known' category should also be used if individuals do not want to provide demographic information. You should not guess or make an assumption about demographics but instead use the 'not known' category.

Neither Homeless Link nor MHCLG hold any case level data collected during the snapshot estimates, only aggregate data. You can find more detailed information on data sharing on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.

Local authority mergers

Where local authorities have merged, the snapshot estimate should be carried out within the new local authority boundaries and one set of snapshot and demographic information submitted. For support choosing which process is most appropriate within new boundaries, please contact verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Note that for operational ease count-based estimates should have one base of operations. If multiple bases are unavoidable, please contact Homeless Link at the earliest opportunity, as multiple independent partners may be required.

Definition of rough sleeping

For the purpose of the estimates, people sleeping rough are defined as:

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”).

A bash, or bender, is a makeshift shelter structure, often made from tarpaulin or wood.

It is important that partner agencies taking part understand the definition of rough sleeping and do not include people in hostels or shelters, individuals who are sofa-surfing, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes or organised protest, squatters or Travellers.

If you have a site in your area that you are unsure falls under the rough sleeping definition or exclusions above, you should contact the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator. The Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier will also be able to offer guidance during the quality assurance process.

The rough sleeping statistics do not include every form of homelessness or everyone sleeping rough during October and November – it is a single night snapshot, which includes only people seen, or thought to be, sleeping rough on the chosen single ‘typical’ night using one definition, as above.

Deciding which approach to use for the snapshot estimate

Each local authority chooses the process that best meets its local context. While Homeless Link cannot tell local authorities which process to use, as part of our initial contact and quality assurance process we will ask why the choice has been made and provide feedback to local authorities where we have concerns that the proposed approach might not produce the most accurate snapshot. If evidence comes to light that the chosen process has missed out individuals or sleep sites known to the local authority or included people who are not within the rough sleeping definition, the

Quality Assurance Verifier will not be able to rate the local authority's figure as 'fully assured'.

Please note that all local authorities, including those receiving support from Rough Sleeping or Homelessness Advisers at MHCLG, can choose from any of these approaches.

A **count-based estimate** is the number of people seen sleeping rough in the local authority area on a 'typical' night – a single date chosen by the local authority between 1st October and 30th November. It is a snapshot and will not record everyone in the area with a history of rough sleeping during the two months. As part of the revised quality assurance process for count-based estimates, all local authorities wishing to follow this approach must meet with their designated Quality Assurance Verifier before their typical night to discuss the local context.

An **evidence-based estimate** is an evidence-based assessment by partners, leading to a single snapshot figure that represents the number of people thought to be sleeping rough in the local authority area on a 'typical night' – a single date chosen by the local authority between 1st October and 30th November. It is a snapshot and will not include everyone in the area with a history of rough sleeping during the two months.

An **evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count** is as above, with the evidence sources including a street count, which might not be as extensive as the count-based estimate. All spotlight counts must take place after midnight.

Reasons to choose a count-based estimate

- People sleeping rough are in sleep sites that will be visible/accessible at night.
- There are changes in the number, population or location of people sleeping rough where sites are visible (e.g. areas near transport hubs where transient groups sleeping rough make the figures unpredictable from one night to the next; areas that regularly see people new to the streets).
- There are difficulties forming an evidence-based estimate on the basis of the information available (e.g. lack of partners who have intelligence about where people are sleeping rough, or partner agencies refuse to share data).
- There is significant disagreement about the numbers between agencies, and sites are visible/accessible.

Reasons to choose an evidence-based estimate

- Sleep sites are inaccessible e.g. in woods or dispersed across rural areas.
- Sleep sites are, during the night, unsafe to access or are hidden from sight.
- The local authority cannot arrange safe access to known rough sleeping sites (e.g. parks, tower blocks) during a street count.
- There is regular intelligence gathering in place by a number of agencies and they are happy to share their intelligence with the local authority.

- Numbers of people sleeping rough are consistently low, they are already in touch with services, and partner agencies agree this is the case (i.e. there are rarely people who are new or returning to the streets).
- The local authority can gather sufficient and reliable intelligence on people sleeping rough on the typical night via partner agencies.
- Partner agencies agree to collect information for an agreed night and to share this with the local authority for the purpose of the estimate.

Reasons to choose an evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count

- There is a mix of visible/accessible and hidden/inaccessible locations in the local authority area.
- The individuals sleeping rough or overall numbers of people sleeping rough in visible/accessible sites change frequently.
- There are conflicting views from partner agencies about which method is right for the area.
- Additional robust intelligence comes to light on the night of a planned street count about hidden rough sleeping (i.e. the process is expanded from count-based estimate to evidence based estimate meeting).

Local authorities can decide which approach to choose to determine their snapshot estimate. But they should use the approach that will most accurately reflect the number of people sleeping rough in their area and will provide the most robust estimate.

The decision should be made by early September so that there is time to plan next steps – a count-based estimate requires approx. 6 weeks' lead-in time because it will involve partner agencies/volunteers.

You will find an explainer video to support you with selecting the right approach for your area on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.

Changing approach from year to year

Any decision to change the overall approach from one year to the next should be guided by whether it will produce the most accurate and robust figure. Homeless Link will ask for details of this decision-making in our initial contact and during the quality assurance process to seek confirmation that the change meets the criteria set out in this guidance (above).

Note that undertaking a count at other times of year is not in itself sufficient reason to change between evidence-based and count-based estimates. Counts taken at other points of the year may not be a guide to levels of rough sleeping in October/November as there may be seasonal fluctuations in the level and patterns of rough sleeping. The existence of hidden rough sleeping sites should also be considered when deciding on your choice of approach.

Local authorities can adjust aspects of the process from year to year to achieve greater accuracy, for example:

- Choosing the 'typical' night earlier (e.g. October) to reduce the risk of severe weather.
- Changing night of the week in response to a busier night time economy.
- Starting a street count later (e.g. 2am instead of midnight) in response to a busier night time economy.
- Involving new partners and/or people with lived experience to improve evidence base/engagement.
- Changing approach to take into account a significant change in the local context, such as boundary changes.

Changing approach due to unforeseen circumstances

Plans for count-based snapshot estimates may need to be reviewed due to unforeseen circumstances, for example an unexpected extreme weather event or protests. Where a planned count-based estimate cannot go ahead and is changed to an evidence-based estimate or evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count, the local authority lead or count coordinator must email verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk to inform the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator. A Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier will attend the estimate meeting. They may also carry out further quality assurance checks including speaking to independent partners and other partner agencies. This further quality assurance process must be completed and reviewed by the Homeless Link Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator for a local authority's snapshot estimate returns to have met the quality assurance requirements following a change of approach.

Working with local partner agencies

Local partner agencies should be consulted to discuss what intelligence they have about rough sleeping locally and to check if there are any factors that might affect the choice of a 'typical' night for the estimate.

The local authority should involve those local agencies that will have the most accurate information about who is sleeping rough.

Local partner agencies could include

- Outreach teams
- Advice agencies
- Hostels, day centres, night shelters
- Housing department
- Social services, youth workers, women's services
- Drug and alcohol support services
- Probation, police, community safety teams

- Health and mental health services
- Faith groups, soup runs, street pastors
- Housing Associations
- Town centre/local retail security / management
- Park rangers
- Refuse collectors
- Street wardens

You will find an explainer video to support you with selecting the right approach for your area on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.

Involving independent partners

To meet the quality assurance standards, each rough sleeping snapshot must involve at least one independent partner. An independent partner is someone not commissioned or funded by the local authority; they could, for example, be from community groups, faith groups, soup kitchens or volunteers from the public. The Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier is **not** an independent partner.

The involvement of non-commissioned, independent partners is an essential element of any rough sleeping estimate, creating greater transparency about how the estimate is carried out and enabling Homeless Link to hear from independent partners as part of the Quality Assurance process.

The independent partner/s involvement will differ depending on your area's choice of approach. In areas carrying out a count-based estimate, the independent partner must attend the street count. In areas using either the evidence-based estimate or evidence-based estimate including spotlight count approach, the independent partner must attend the estimate meeting. They may also choose to attend the spotlight count if they have sufficient resources or be involved in providing intelligence on the individuals rough sleeping.

Identifying and contacting at least one independent partner should be part of the planning process. Where possible, we advise involving more than one independent partner.

Independent partners could include

- Community groups
- Faith groups
- Soup kitchens
- Volunteers from the public e.g. teachers, solicitors, vicars etc.
- People with lived experience of rough sleeping or homelessness

- Services not funded by the local authority e.g. hospices
- The local football foundation, or other charitable foundation
- NHS staff who don't work in specialist homelessness services

The following are not independent partners

- Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifiers
- Outreach team
- Police
- Probation Service or other similar statutory organisations
- MHCLG

Homeless Link will not be able to fully assure the quality of any snapshot estimates that do not involve at least one independent partner.

If you have any issues with involving at least one independent partner, please contact Homeless Link's Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator at the earliest opportunity via verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

You will find two explainer videos, one for local authorities to support you with selecting the right approach for your area, and one for Independent Partners to explain their role, on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.

Carrying out a count-based estimate

This section contains a full explanation of how to organise and execute a count-based estimate, including a guidance video and links to any helpful documents. The quality assurance for count-based estimates will take place remotely, unless specified by Homeless Link. A full explanation of the remote quality assurance process is provided below. And you will find an explainer video to guide you through the process of setting up and executing your count-based estimate on the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

July – September

Appoint a coordinator

The local authority lead should decide whether to coordinate their own estimate or give responsibility for the count-based estimate process to an external coordinator, for example a rough sleeping coordinator, Housing Options manager or outreach team leader. They will need to involve local partner agencies in the process, including at least one independent partner to attend the count on the 'typical' night.

Check that the local authority lead has access to MHCLG's DELTA online data collection system.

September

Choosing the date and time

Allow at least 6 weeks to plan the count. Activities leading up to the count will include:

- Gathering intelligence from partner agencies.
- Identifying your independent partner
- Preparing a data protection statement.
- Organising volunteers, including an independent partner.
- Planning the night's activities.
- Liaising with the police.
- Arranging a Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier.

The count must take place on a single 'typical' night. If it spreads over two or more nights, the process cannot be verified.

When choosing a date, you should:

- Avoid a night when unusual local factors may distort the numbers, such as events, festivals, charity sleep-outs, higher levels of police activity or changes to service opening times.
- Identify an appropriate day of the week: people may bed down later or be less visible on weekends. Also take into account whether certain days, such as those on which football matches or club nights take place, may distort average levels of rough sleeping in the area.
- Make a contingency plan for severe weather conditions that change patterns of rough sleeping (see below).

The count night should not be used for media activity – the presence of film crews or photographers means that it is not a 'typical' night, for example because people may move sleep sites to avoid being filmed or photographed. Journalists can be present during the count provided they follow the guidance.

The date of the count should only be shared on a 'need to know' basis in case this causes a change in the pattern of rough sleeping, resulting in a less accurate figure.

Start times should be tailored to meet local circumstances. The earliest permitted start is midnight. In cities and towns with a busy nighttime economy, a start time of 2am or even later is more appropriate to include people who bed down after pubs and clubs close. In rural areas, where the majority of people are sleeping rough away from built-up and well-lit areas, counts may be conducted in the hours after dawn.

There is no fixed duration for a count – it will depend on geography, number of counters, number of people sleeping rough, and what occurs as the teams are talking to the people they meet e.g. getting people to shelter/hubs, or dealing with emergencies. Typically counts start between 12-2am and finish between 3-6am. In most cases, if appropriate intelligence has been gathered and enough volunteers recruited, counts take no more than 2 to 3 hours to conduct.

Local authorities without regular outreach might want to do a street needs audit with a smaller team in advance of the count to gather intelligence about sleep sites, so that

the count can be planned around known sleeping sites. In most areas it is not feasible to check every street/alley/car park etc., so some way of targeting teams is needed.

Pre-count activity

Please note that 'pre-counts' by outreach or police teams on the evening of the chosen 'typical' night should not be used, as they create a risk of disruption. Homeless Link may refuse to assure the quality of your count if it becomes clear that people who were sleeping rough during the pre-count are no longer visible (i.e. the pre-count moved them on, whether intentionally or not).

Homeless Link may require people housed during the pre-count to be included in your final figure, as they would have been counted if found later that night.

If outreach teams are in the habit of contacting people during an earlier evening pre-count because they are not visible at night (e.g. because they sleep in tents), the local authority should consider whether this is grounds to choose an evidence-based estimate, including a spotlight count approach instead.

Update Homeless Link and arrange your snapshot estimate quality assurance meeting/calls

All snapshot estimates are quality assured by Homeless Link to ensure that they have been carried out safely and in accordance with the guidance.

All Quality Assurance Verifiers are trained and supported by Homeless Link. They are associates or volunteers drawn from our staff. The Quality Assurance Verifier's role is to speak to key individuals involved in the count and assess how well the organisation and execution met the requirements of this approach.

Quality assurance for count-based estimates will be carried out remotely and in two parts, unless otherwise specified by Homeless Link.

Quality Assurance Part 1

A compulsory pre-count meeting with the Quality Assurance Verifier is now compulsory and should take place, online, no later than two weeks prior to the 'typical' night.

The purpose of the pre-count meeting is for the Quality Assurance Verifier to ensure that the count-based estimate approach is the most appropriate for the local authority context via the following questions:

- Who was approached for intelligence on known rough sleeping sites and hotspots and to agree the 'typical night' for the count
- The process for deciding which areas to include in the count mapping
- Whether any of the mapped areas are difficult or risky to access
- What access arrangements have been made e.g. for tower blocks and locked parks

- Whether there are any events, e.g. Bonfire Night, Xmas lights switch-on, football fixtures, Armistice Day commemorations, etc., schedule on or around the date of the 'typical night'

The responses to these questions will be recorded by the Quality Assurance Verifier. A template form will be sent to all local authorities following the count-based estimate approach.

Based on the responses to the above questions, the Quality Assurance Verifier will recommend either proceeding with the count-based estimate approach or switching to the evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count approach.

It is not the role of the Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier to insist local authorities change their rough sleeping snapshot estimate approach. Rather, where a local authority proceeds with a count-based estimate when recommended not to, the approach is not properly followed on the typical night, and the Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier does not feel the snapshot figure is robust, they will record it as 'not assured'.

Quality Assurance Part 2

The post-count quality assurance process will take place via phone/online during which the Quality Assurance Verifier will speak separately to the local authority lead or count-coordinator (as appropriate), the independent partner, and one other participant from a partner agency. The Quality Assurance Verifier will ask the local authority lead for contact details for the relevant partners and arrange the calls / online meetings directly with each one. The calls / meetings should last no more than around 20 minutes.

Please note that if, at the end of the quality assurance process, the Quality Assurance Verifier is not able to grade a count-based estimate as 'fully assured' that local authority **will not** be offered the option to hold an evidence-based estimate meeting with a further quality assurance process.

Snapshot estimate quality assurance & RAG ratings

In 2025, updated quality assurance ratings and RAG ratings were introduced for all count-based estimates. On the updated evidence-based estimate verification form you will now see the following two sections:

Quality Assurance

RAG Rating

Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance (formerly verification) is the process through which the Quality Assurance Verifier allocated by Homeless Link ensures that the correct processes, as set out in the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates Toolkit 2026 have been followed and

the snapshot estimate figures are robust. Following processing, the allocated verifier will classify each rough sleeping snapshot estimate as below.

Assured: All elements of the chosen approach have been followed, no concerns about process or execution

Not Fully Assured: Chosen approach was partially followed e.g. no independent partner, count began before midnight, etc. (see feedback below)

Not Assured: Chosen approach was not followed, e.g. known sites/hotspots were inaccessible or not visited, safety concerns, a different approach would have provided a more robust figure. (see feedback below)

RAG Rating

The RAG rating is a simple traffic-light-style colour-coding system used to grade how closely each local authority has been able fulfil the requirements of their chosen rough sleeping snapshot estimate approach, and whether/to what extent intervention by Homeless Link was needed. It helps Homeless Link to identify which LAs to offer additional support in subsequent rough sleeping snapshot estimates. These ratings do not feature in the MHCLG publication.

Green: no concerns with preparation or execution, light-touch support provided by Homeless Link

Amber: some concerns with preparation/execution if the chosen approach, e.g. no independent partner involved, substantial support from Homeless Link was required, and/or snapshot total classified as 'partially verified' by Homeless Link. Highlighted for support in 2027

Red: significant deviation from chosen approach, e.g. inappropriate choice of approach, known sleep sites not included in mapping, and/or snapshot total classified as 'unverified' by Homeless Link. Prioritised for support in 2027

Quality Assurance ratings for local authorities is included in MHCLG rough sleeping snapshot estimate reporting, however, the RAG ratings are not. The RAG ratings are not in any way punitive, they are simply to record how closely each local authority has been able to fulfil the requirements of the count-based estimate approach and whether additional support for future snapshot estimates should be offered to local authorities rated Amber or Red.

Please note that following the change to remote quality assurance verification for count-based estimates, and in line with the approach for evidence-based estimates (with or without a spotlight count), any count-based estimates that are RAG rated Amber or Red will be automatically allocated an in-person quality assurance verifier for the subsequent year's rough sleeping snapshot estimate.

A example of the new count-based estimate verification form will be sent out to all local authorities following the count-based estimate approach. You can also find one on the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

Notifying Homeless Link of your approach

Contact Homeless Link's Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator at verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk as soon as you have confirmed your approach so that we can arrange quality assurance – please let us know as early as possible and notify us immediately if your date or approach changes.

Early / mid-September

Recruiting counters

Many local authorities look for volunteers from their own workforce (in return for time off in lieu or overtime), as well as looking for volunteer counters from the local statutory and voluntary sectors or faith and community groups, e.g. police, park rangers, day centre staff, street pastors and advice workers. This is a good opportunity for agencies to learn more about each other's work. If there is a local outreach team, they should be fully involved. Local authorities should always involve volunteers who are independent of the council and its outreach team (i.e. non-commissioned), as this strengthens the credibility of the count.

Where the process does not involve at least one independent partner, Homeless Link will not be able to assess the quality of the process as fully 'assured'. Therefore, please involve at least one independent partner.

If local authorities would like any help with engaging faith & community groups to be involved in the count, we can ask our colleagues at Housing Justice for support. You should also check out the first two slides in the [Common Snapshot Estimate Scenarios and Some Possible Solutions](#) slide deck in the resource library for some helpful suggestions.

All those involved in the count should be asked not to share the date of the 'typical' night chosen, beyond essential contacts.

Mid-September – count night

Organising a count base

A count base is necessary as it allows teams to be briefed beforehand, to ask any questions and to de-brief and share figures afterwards. It also ensures access to toilets and handwashing facilities during the night.

Coordinators should make an assessment on how the base of operations is able to meet any new public health guidelines that may come into force. The count base should have a risk assessment in order to be used on the night of the count. Please notify Homeless Link at the earliest opportunity if you have any issues with your count base: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Mapping, counting teams and access

It is good practice to liaise with neighbouring areas and, if possible, organise a count on the same night over a county or wider sub-regional area. This reduces the risk of double counting people who move across local authority boundaries. Even if the count starts at midnight, always use 'night of into morning of' to ensure clarity about the date and aid travel/work planning e.g. night of Weds 13th into morning of Thurs 14th.

You don't need to cover every street or park in the local authority area, and it's unlikely you'll have enough counters to do this. It's better to use your prior intelligence gathering to focus on 'hotspot' areas where people are known to sleep and areas where people are sometimes seen bedded down. If you know that sleep sites are occupied but inaccessible or unsafe, consider using the evidence-based estimate meeting process including a spotlight count to achieve greater accuracy.

Coordinators should divide the area being counted into segments for each counting team.

Each counting team will need a map clearly showing the boundaries of their segment and any hotspots within it. Agree exact boundaries, identifying individual streets or parts of streets, and draw them on the map. It is important to be precise about boundaries so that areas are not double counted or missed entirely.

Wherever possible, the areas covered should be well known to the teams and individual counters. The most effective counters are those with knowledge of where people are likely to be sleeping rough in that area, for example workers from local outreach teams. Try to include someone with knowledge of local rough sleeping in each team, alongside volunteers from other agencies and independent partner(s).

Check that you have recruited enough volunteers to cover each mapped segment. It is advisable to plan at least one mobile counting team in a car to cover outlying areas and support other teams if they encounter delays. At least one person, usually the coordinator, will need to stay at the count base to deal with queries and check in with counting teams during the night.

Plan ahead to gain access to non-public areas where people may be bedded down (e.g. hospital or college grounds, parks, building stairwells, car parks). Do not plan access for volunteer counters to areas that will be unsafe. You might need to contact police, park rangers or security firms to gain access and support the count. In previous years, some local authorities have obtained keys to stairwells of flats where people were likely to be sleeping, which ensured counters could check these areas. This approach is recommended, as long as safety is maintained.

There are particular challenges associated with counting in rural and urban areas, and with certain groups of people sleeping rough. The following sections, found towards the end of this document, offer guidance on including rough sleepers who might be in hidden or otherwise inaccessible locations:

- Tips on intelligence gathering
- Where to count and challenges to consider

Preparing a data protection statement

The coordinator should provide copies of a data protection statement on the night of the count. This is in case a person seen sleeping rough wants to know how their information will be used or stored, or to assist the person doing the count to answer any questions, from volunteers or members of the public for example. The GDPR lists the kinds of information that must be provided. For further information see the 'Data sharing' section below.

Making contingency plans – emergency accommodation and severe weather (SWEP)

Speak to local homelessness and housing services to agree the response to people found sleeping rough who want to access accommodation and support e.g. a hub, B&B or hostel. The count should not stop people from accessing accommodation. If there are severe weather conditions on the night of the estimate, the local authority may activate their Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP), if they have one. This provides support for individuals during extreme weather. If people sleeping rough do take up emergency accommodation as part of the SWEP, they are still included in the count.

Unusual circumstances such as severe weather conditions (e.g. activation of the severe weather emergency protocol (SWEP), snow, heavy rains or flooding) or man-made events such as riots or protests may have an impact on numbers. In some circumstances, it may be impossible for the count to go ahead.

If the planned count coincides with unusual circumstances – in particular activation of SWEP – the coordinator, in consultation with Homeless Link and the Quality Assurance Verifier, may decide on one of the following courses of action:

- Postpone the count – it still has to happen by 30th November.
- Proceed as a spotlight count that is used to inform an evidence-based estimate meeting, based on actual numbers counted plus others, such as people in SWEP provision on the night of the count, who would otherwise have slept rough. This is the most common approach due to the strict Oct-Nov timeframe.
- Cancel the count and instead follow the evidence-based estimate meeting process, based on a single 'typical' night before 30th November where SWEP is not in force. You will need to follow the guidance, choose a new date and plan an estimate meeting with partner agencies.

2 weeks before the count

Information to/from counters, Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier and police

Confirm availability of counters and at least one independent partner, their contact details and addresses.

Meet with the Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier to complete phase one of the count-based estimate quality assurance process, as set out above.

Ensure there is a plan for everyone to get home safely – it is the coordinator's responsibility to provide transport for counters. Depending on the start time and location of the count base, transport to the count may also be required. Please do not ask counters to arrive more than an hour before the count starts – it's already a long night for everyone involved.

Send the 'Briefing for street count teams and volunteers' to the counters along with details of the date ('night of x into morning of x' format), time and base of operations for the count. Ask them to bring mobile phone, torch and ID if possible. Confirm their transport home and get their postcode details if you need to arrange transport.

Notify police of the count taking place.

The week of the count

Practical preparations

Ensure that you are ready for the count night:

- Check the weather forecast and review SWEP contingency plan.
- Book taxis to/from venue for counters or put the taxi firm on standby.
- Print maps for each counting team showing the area and any hotspots to cover.
- Ensure each team will have a torch and phone, plus alarms and reflective jackets/armbands if using. Consider supplying hand sanitiser to counting teams.
- Prepare packs for counting teams: map, pens, definition of rough sleeping, ID letter, H&S checklist, rough sleeping count forms, any relevant local service info, language chart. You will find example of all documents in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#)
- Assign counters to teams, including an outreach worker or someone with local knowledge in each team.

The night of the count

Count process

- Check availability of emergency accommodation/assessment hubs on the night.
- Ensure each counting team has a mobile, torch and pack – check you have the right mobile numbers.
- Talk through the Briefing for Count Teams and answer any questions.
- Agree timing of check-in calls to teams during the count.
- If possible, offer hot drinks/snacks at the base of operations.

- If there have been any safety concerns during the count, ensure counters are debriefed and agree a follow up call.
- Agree a final figure and demographic information with partner agencies and the independent partner once all forms have been returned.
- Check that each counter has a safe route home – coordinate sharing taxis/lifts home.

Safety considerations

Count coordinators have a responsibility to ensure the safety of all those involved in the rough sleeping count. You should balance the need to keep people safe with the need to gather as much reliable information about people sleeping rough as possible.

To get this balance right, the coordinator should:

- Give clear guidance to counters about whether or not to wake up any unknown/new people found sleeping rough during the count. This would be to find out more about them and to offer support and, where available, assessment/accommodation. In most cases, unless counters are outreach workers, it will be safer not to wake the person, but to leave some information about local services and arrange for outreach to look for them on the next shift. Please note that demographic information can be recorded as 'not known'.
- Organise the count so that counters work in teams of at least two and have relevant equipment e.g. torches, phones. The coordinator should be aware of each team's planned route to and from their counting area and check in with them by phone at least once during the count.
- The conduct of the counters is of paramount importance and the pre-count briefing should set clear expectations. They should be given clear guidance beforehand about their role and should be sent home from the count if they are unsuitable (e.g. intoxicated).
- Counters should be told not to enter areas that they feel are unsafe without support from the police.
- 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 people to get information and offer support, but this must be done sensitively.
- 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.
- Arranging safe transport from (and potentially to) the count base is the local authority coordinator's responsibility.

- Counters should carry identification and a letter from the local authority explaining their purpose in being out late at night and in unusual locations. It is common for counters to be challenged, for example by building concierges and car park security guards.
- On the night of the count, the count coordinator should go through the safety procedures carefully with counters and give counters time to ask questions. This will cover: when to call in, how to respond to emergencies, when to leave an area, and how to deal with any aggressive behaviour.
- While rare, there have been incidents of concern during counts – coordinators may want to seek advice from police in advance about potentially risky areas and adjust patches/exclude areas accordingly. If safety concerns mean that you are unable to visit certain areas, yet there is intelligence that individuals will be rough sleeping in this area on the ‘typical’ night, then a count-based estimate would not be suitable and you may not be verified as the figure would be inaccurate for your area. Please consider an evidence-based estimate, including a spotlight count instead to ensure all individuals (including those in the inaccessible unsafe areas) are counted. If you change approach due to intelligence, then inform Homeless Link at the earliest possible stage as this will affect the quality assurance process.

Please also refer to the Count Risk Assessment (for coordinators) and Health & Safety Checklist (for counters) in ‘Useful Forms & Other Resources’ in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

Briefing the counters

The count coordinator should start the evening at the count base with a briefing session for counters. The briefing is to ensure that everyone understands:

- The definition of rough sleeping.
- The role of the count coordinator and the independent partner.
- Any local arrangements for recording detail of individual people sleeping rough (MHCLG only require the single figure and demographic data) and support/accommodation options on the night.
- Safety considerations, as listed above.

Please also refer to the coordinator’s briefing notes in ‘Useful Forms & Resources’ in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

Interventions on the night

It is strongly recommended that prior arrangements are made so that emergency beds are available for people found on the count who want to move off the streets. If people sleeping rough are supported with any intervention on the night of the count (including referral to an assessment hub, use of emergency services, referral to SWEP or other emergency provision) they should still be counted as bedded down for the

purposes of the count and recorded within the single figure. If someone is asleep and you have made the decision not to wake the individual because you have no offer of accommodation, leave a letter or card to let them know how they can contact the outreach team, local authority or other forms of support. Where possible, make a plan to return to their sleep site the following night.

Recording the data

On the night of the count, local authorities should use the Rough Sleeping Count Form (see 'Forms and other Useful Resources' in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#)) or create an alternative form for local use. The local authority should ask counters to collect any data about individuals, trends or hotspots that will be relevant to local planning.

- Counters should record each individual person on a separate line on the form, rather than writing totals on the form which cannot be verified as an accurate record.
- Information about each person sleeping rough may be recorded from previous knowledge of the person and their sleeping site, rather than having to wake them.
- If an individual is not known, and where it is safe to do so (see above), the counter may attempt to wake each individual to record their details. 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 and use the 'not known' category for demographic details, unless counters know the individual (from the individual accessing their service, for example) and their details.
- Establishing the identity of a person sleeping rough on the night of the count will help with follow-up and referrals. However, note the data protection rules below.
- The count process includes collecting data on the number of non-UK nationals represented among people sleeping rough. To plan local responses for migrants sleeping rough see [Homeless Link's guidance](#). Note that all people recorded and verified during the count must be included in the single figure, regardless of nationality or recourse to public funds and including people whose faces are covered and are not woken. Every person seen that meets the rough sleeping definition must be counted towards the final figure for your area.
- As counters might find people who do not speak English as their first language, it's useful to give them a language ID chart. This enables the person sleeping rough to point at their preferred language. Use the [Refugee Council chart](#) and provide copies for each counting team.

- It is useful for counters to give as much information as possible on the location of people sleeping rough, as this may help with future planning of services, as well as more immediate offers of support.
- Counting forms must be completed on the night of the count. Ideally, this should happen without the coordinator present. Counting forms are kept by the local authority and destroyed following your data protection policies.
- Data should not be uploaded to DELTA until the quality assurance process has been completed and the signed off form sent from verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk.
- If demographic data changes (e.g. new information comes to light), inform Homeless Link as soon as possible as we will be cross-checking our verified data (the data on the quality assurance form) with data submitted to DELTA. Where data does not match, and discrepancies are not resolved in time, DELTA submissions will not be certified.
- Details of individuals sleeping rough are confidential. Information should be stored and shared in line with the protocol of the local authority (or the agency coordinating the count), which may include information sharing arrangements with relevant local services.

Data sharing

- The local authority hold and own any personal data collected; they are the data controller. It is their responsibility to ensure that the correct procedures are in place to adhere to the Data Protection Act 2018.
- Homeless Link and MHCLG receive aggregate data, via DELTA. No personal data is shared with either organisation therefore they are not data controllers in this process.
- As part of the count, it must be made clear to individuals that they are providing their personal details (name, date of birth) voluntarily, and are not obliged to provide them. If a person refuses to give their personal information, they should still be recorded as sleeping rough, and demographic information including gender, nationality, and age will be recorded as “not known” if this is not known.
- The count coordinator should provide copies of a data protection statement on the night of the count. This is in case a person seen sleeping rough wants to know how their information will be used and stored, or to assist the person doing the count to answer any questions. The GDPR lists the kinds of information that must be provided.

After the count

Please do not submit your data to DELTA until you have received the quality assurance form with the verified data from verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Following the remote Quality Assurance process, local authorities should submit the single figure and demographic data using the MHCLG's DELTA online system. See the DELTA guidance on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage for further information.

Data must be submitted to MHCLG by the local authority using DELTA by Friday 11th December 2026.

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Evidence-based estimate approach

This section contains a full explanation of how to organise and execute an evidence-based estimate, including a guidance video and links to any helpful documents. There are no changes to the evidence-based estimate Quality Assurance (formerly verification) process this year.

July – September

Appoint a coordinator

The local authority lead should decide to coordinate their own estimate or give responsibility for the estimate process to an external coordinator, for example a rough sleeping coordinator, Housing Options manager or outreach team leader. They will need to involve local partner agencies in the process, including at least one independent partner to attend the estimate meeting.

Check that the local authority lead has access to MHCLG's DELTA online data collection system. See the DELTA guidance on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage for further information.

Choosing the 'typical' night

The estimate is based on a single, 'typical' night between 1st October and 30th November. The date can be at any point during October-November and can change from one year to the next (see above). The last possible date is night of 29th into morning of 30th November, if that night can be defined as 'typical' in an area.

The coordinator chooses the 'typical' night and agencies will collate intelligence in relation to this one night. It is good practice to liaise with neighbouring areas and, if possible, organise an estimate on the same night over a county or wider sub-regional area to minimise the risk of double counting.

Always use the date format 'night of x into morning of x' to avoid confusion e.g. 'the night of Wednesday 23rd October into morning of Thursday 24th October.'

Estimates based on two or more nights cannot be verified.

When choosing your 'typical' night, please take into account the following:

- Avoid a night when unusual local factors may distort the numbers, such as events, festivals, charity sleep-outs, 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, consider whether certain days, such as those with club nights or football matches, may distort average levels of rough sleeping in the area.
- Whether an outreach shift is planned that can provide a spotlight count as a data source. Please note that all spotlight counts must start after midnight on the 'typical' night chosen and an outreach shift prior to midnight would not be classed as a spotlight count.
- Make a contingency plan for severe weather conditions that change patterns of rough sleeping (see below).

Update Homeless Link

The quality of all estimates is assessed by Homeless Link. Contact Homeless Link's Rough Sleeping Snapshot Project Coordinator at: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk as soon as you have confirmed your approach, 'typical' night, and estimate meeting date so that we can arrange a quality assurance call.

In some cases, Homeless Link will ask a Quality Assurance Verifier to attend an online estimate meeting to assess the quality of the rough sleeping snapshot estimate. In other areas we will carry this out by telephone after the meeting. Where an estimate is informed by a spotlight count, Homeless Link will verify the overall estimate meeting rather than the spotlight count.

September

Involve partner agencies and identify your independent partner(s)

Involving other agencies ensures that you will estimate the most accurate single figure, because:

- Agencies working 'on the ground' will have information about who is likely to be sleeping rough.
- In local authorities that cover large areas, involving agencies that see people in particular areas (such as a day centre in a particular town, or a warden covering a particular park), or have an overall coverage (such as police), will ensure that rough sleeping is evaluated across the whole area.

- Their knowledge, expertise, and intelligence about groups and individuals will provide a wider range of information on which to base discussion and analysis of rough sleeping numbers.
- The single figure is less likely to be challenged, both because agencies have taken part in the process and because the single figure has been reached using a clear system of evidence gathering.
- It enables local authorities to understand of the numbers and the issues, but also the potential solutions and opportunities for partnership working.

Local partner agencies for your estimate should include some or all of the following:

- Outreach teams
- Advice agencies
- Day centres, night shelters, hostels
- Housing associations
- Housing department
- Social services, youth workers
- Women's services
- Police, probation, community safety teams
- Health services, inc. mental health
- Drug and alcohol services
- Faith groups, soup runs, street pastors
- Substance misuse agencies

Ideally, agencies will assign a lead representative who has access to the relevant information and some knowledge about the situation of individuals sleeping rough, so that they can answer specific questions and reach reliable conclusions about the likelihood of someone sleeping rough on a particular night.

In rural areas, or areas with few or no specific homelessness services, other partner agencies may need to be approached for information. The coordinator can assess whether it would be useful for them to attend an estimate meeting. These could include National Parks Service rangers, parish councils, refuse and street cleaning teams, town centre security and car parking staff.

All estimates will need involve at least one independent partner at the estimate meeting, to be 'fully assured' by the Quality Assurance Verifier. Please refer to the section 'Involving Independent Partners' above.

Explain the process

Where possible, hold initial meetings or conversations with each agency to explain the process, identify any potential sources of disagreement and resolve them in advance. For example, some agencies describe their service users as sleeping rough, but instead they are sofa surfing or squatting, so won't fall into the rough sleeping definition used

for the snapshot estimate process. Having these conversations at the start of the process should make the estimate meeting more effective.

Notify agencies of the date chosen for the 'typical' night of the estimate. Please use the format 'the night of x into the morning of x' to avoid any confusion. Ask them only to share the date on a need-to-know basis to avoid causing changes in the pattern of rough sleeping that might distort the estimate.

Send this guidance to all agencies involved so that they understand the definition of rough sleeping and the process for the chosen approach.

Organise the estimate meeting

Confirm a date for the estimate meeting, for after the chosen 'typical' night. A template invite letter can be found in 'Useful forms and other resources' in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

In areas where the local authority covers a large rural area, the coordinator may decide to carry out the consultation with local partner agencies via a range of means, such as collecting evidence by email and holding an online estimate meeting to arrive at the single figure. Homeless Link must still be contacted to arrange a quality assurance call.

We highly recommend that all estimate meetings are arranged as online meetings. Please ensure partner agencies are aware of this and are able to access the relevant software for the estimate meeting to take place virtually and they are included in the process, are able to provide their intelligence and listen to others' intelligence. Some organisations restrict use of certain meeting software. Check in advance if this will cause any problems.

Explain who will be included in the estimate

Refer to the rough sleeping definition below:

"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")."

It is important that agencies taking part understand the definition of rough sleeping and do not include people in hostels or shelters, individuals who are sofa-surfing, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes, organised protests, squatters or Travellers.

Agencies should understand that the purpose of the estimate is to assess the numbers of people rough sleeping on the chosen 'typical' night, rather than a larger sample of street activity, hidden homelessness or people using homelessness services. This means that, for example, a person who sometimes sleeps rough but sometimes has

accommodation/shelter will not be included in the estimate unless there is evidence that they did sleep rough on the chosen 'typical' night.

Some services record people as sleeping rough based only on self-reporting, which might conflict with outreach data about how many people are seen or, where there is no outreach provision, cannot be verified. These services might need support to assess whether someone is street homeless on the 'typical' night used for the estimate. This can be done, for example, by asking for additional information such as rough sleeping locations that can be checked by other agencies. Some people may be reluctant to share their sleep sites for safety reasons. Women and young people, for example, will often try to remain hidden. Agencies should be mindful of this and work on a case-by-case basis when considering thresholds of evidence for rough sleeping (see 'Evidence of rough sleeping' section below).

Agree information sharing protocols

Estimates rely on agencies being able to share accurate basic information about an individual's situation on a particular night. There has to be a way of identifying individuals, by name or a unique identifier e.g. initials and date of birth. Without this there is a risk of double counting or including people who have been housed.

Where agencies already have a data sharing protocol in place, for example from a Rough Sleeping Action Group or other multi-agency work, this can be used. If no data sharing agreement exists, you can use the template in the 'Useful forms and other resources' in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#).

Some agencies may decline to join the data sharing agreement. In this case you should explain the protocol and give reassurance about what the data will be used for and that it will be discarded following the estimate. If they still refuse let them know that, while they can still submit information, more weight will be given to those agencies whose evidence is supported by complete data, as otherwise there is a risk of arriving at a less accurate figure, for example due to double counting.

Agencies should collect evidence for the night of the estimate and either bring it to the estimate meeting to discuss verbally or send by email in a password encrypted file. You can either circulate the template estimate form (see Useful Forms and Other Resources below) or create your own form.

The local authority holds and owns any personal data collected; they are the data controller. It is their responsibility to ensure that the correct procedures are in place to adhere to the Data Protection Act 2018.

Homeless Link and MHCLG receive aggregate data, via DELTA. No personal data is shared with either organisation therefore they are not data controllers in this process.

A week before the estimate night

Severe weather

Check the weather forecast leading up to the night chosen for the estimate. If there is severe weather this could change patterns of rough sleeping, especially if the severe weather emergency protocol (SWEP) is in place. If this happens, you might need to change the date in order to ensure agencies are basing intelligence on a 'typical' night. Please inform Homeless Link if you decide to change your date, as we will need to make new quality assurance arrangements.

Night of, and morning after the estimate

Partner agencies note any evidence of people sleeping rough, including observation and self-reporting, including specific details of location and individuals where available.

After the 'typical' night

The estimate meeting

Holding an estimate meeting is the most effective way to collate the evidence of rough sleeping on the chosen night and to discuss any potential duplicates or misinformation. Where disagreement is likely to occur, or where there are conflicting approaches between agencies on the scale of the issue or potential solutions, a meeting is most likely to get to the bottom of the issue.

Please note that the estimate meeting cannot take place on a date before the chosen 'typical' night.

Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifiers will remotely attend a percentage of estimate meetings as part of the process based on a combination of concern/risk, geography and availability. The coordinator or any partners can invite Homeless Link to their meeting, request additional support or raise concerns for Homeless Link to investigate. Please contact verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk if you would like to request a Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier to attend your estimate meeting.

If there is already a local forum or network which brings together key agencies working with people sleeping rough, this can be used for the estimate meeting (with expanded membership, if needed) as long as sufficient data sharing protocols are in place. If the local authority has a rough sleeping action group or similar meeting, the estimate process will be an extension of their ongoing work to identify and assist people sleeping rough.

Please refer to 'Useful forms and other resources' in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) for a template agenda and notes for the estimate meeting.

If, despite best efforts, it is not possible for an agency to attend your online evidence-based estimate meeting, ask them to submit their evidence in a password encrypted

email file or verbally in a telephone conference. Collate the evidence and resolve any issues or questions that may arise at the evidence-based estimate meeting.

During the quality assurance process, Homeless Link will check which agencies have been involved. We expect that estimates using the evidence-based process will show more than one data source.

If the process does not involve at least one independent partner, Homeless Link will not be able to assess the rough sleeping snapshot estimate as 'assured'. The independent partner(s) must attend the evidence-based estimate meeting; they may also contribute intelligence and be involved in the discussion of the final figure.

If local authorities would like any help with engaging faith & community groups to be involved in the count, we can ask our colleagues at Housing Justice for support. You should also check out the first two slides in the [Common Snapshot Estimate Scenarios and Some Possible Solutions](#) slide deck in the resource library for some helpful suggestions.

Evidence of rough sleeping

Each agency should present information on who they think slept rough on the night of the estimate, with reference to the definition of rough sleeping above. Evidence should be provided for each individual.

Examples of evidence that an individual slept rough include:

- Individual seen bedded down by the agency.
- Individual seen bedded down by another partner agency.
- Individual known to the agency and it is clear that they do not have accommodation that they can occupy (people sleeping rough over a longer period/with a history of rough sleeping).
- Individual self-reports sleeping rough over the period alongside evidence that they are sleeping rough (use of services, carrying/storing belongings, appearance – while bearing in mind many people sleeping rough are well-presented, other known factors).
- Information that demonstrates that someone known to be sleeping rough intermittently did sleep rough on the night in question (e.g. they weren't seen in their hostel; were at the day centre early; were discharged from prison or hospital shortly before).

The final decision on the estimated single figure is made by the local authority, taking into account all the evidence and eliminating duplicates or unsubstantiated data. The coordinator might need to collate further information following the estimate meeting in order to resolve any outstanding questions (particularly where people are known to move between local authority boundaries, as there is a risk of duplication with neighbouring estimates). Partner agencies should raise concerns with Homeless Link if they think decisions have been made that are not in line with this guidance by emailing: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Quality Assurance

Coordinators should liaise with Homeless Link throughout the whole process to ensure their estimate is as reliable as possible. Homeless Link should be invited to the estimate meeting – we will identify some meetings for Quality Assurance Verifiers to attend remotely, in all other cases quality assurance will take place by telephone.

The Quality Assurance Verifier will be checking that:

- The coordinator has followed the guidance.
- A 'typical' night has been chosen, in line with this guidance.
- The coordinator has contacted a range of local agencies, including relevant voluntary and community organisations, and invited them to be part of the estimate process.
- At least one independent partner has been involved in the process and attended the estimate meeting.
- Agencies have been given sufficient information to participate in the process and provide the information required.
- Agencies understand the principle of the 'typical' night and the definition of rough sleeping.
- There is a data sharing agreement in place between agencies.
- Enough data and evidence has been gathered to resolve conflicting information and avoid double counting.
- The estimate relates to the 'typical' night chosen, not a wider time period or group of homeless people.
- Intelligence has been examined and discussed to arrive at a reliable figure of people sleeping rough on the night chosen for the estimate.
- There is demographic data for each person sleeping rough and any gaps in data are explained and logged as 'not known'.
- There is a snapshot estimate to be submitted to MHCLG.

An estimate may not be 'assured' if, for example: there were no independent partners involved; there was a lack of robust evidence that people included were sleeping rough on that night; or evidence was not included about known sleep sites or individuals sleeping rough.

After the estimate process ends, the Quality Assurance Verifier will complete the quality assurance form, which will be reviewed by Homeless Link's Project Coordinator before being returned to the local authority lead.

Snapshot estimate quality assurance ratings and RAG ratings

In 2025, updated quality assurance ratings and RAG ratings were introduced for all evidence-based estimates (with or without a spotlight count). On the updated evidence-based estimate verification form you will now see the following two sections:

Quality Assurance

RAG Rating

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is the process through which the Quality Assurance Verifier allocated by Homeless Link ensures that the correct processes, as set out in the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates Toolkit 2026](#), have been followed and the snapshot estimate figures are robust. Following processing, the allocated verifier will classify each rough sleeping snapshot estimate as below.

Assured: All elements of the chosen approach have been followed, no concerns about process or execution

Not Fully Assured: Chosen approach was partially followed e.g. no independent partner, count began before midnight, etc. (see feedback below)

Not Assured: Chosen approach was not followed, e.g. known sites/hotspots were inaccessible or not visited, safety concerns, a different approach would have provided a more robust figure. (see feedback below)

RAG Rating

The RAG rating is a simple traffic-light-style colour-coding system used to grade how closely each local authority has been able to fulfil the requirements of their chosen rough sleeping snapshot estimate approach, and whether/to what extent intervention by Homeless Link was needed. It helps Homeless Link to identify which LAs to offer additional support in subsequent rough sleeping snapshot estimates. These ratings do not feature in the MHCLG publication.

Green: no concerns with preparation or execution, light-touch support provided by Homeless Link

Amber: some concerns with preparation/execution if the chosen approach, e.g. no independent partner involved, substantial support from Homeless Link was required, and/or snapshot total classified as 'partially verified' by Homeless Link. Highlighted for support in 2027

Red: significant deviation from chosen approach, e.g. inappropriate choice of approach, known sleep sites not included in mapping, and/or snapshot total classified as 'unverified' by Homeless Link. Prioritised for support in 2027

Quality Assurance ratings for local authorities are included in MHCLG rough sleeping snapshot estimate reporting, however, the RAG ratings are not. The RAG ratings are not in any way punitive, they are simply to record how closely each local authority has been able to fulfil the requirements of the count-based estimate approach and

whether additional support for future snapshot estimates should be offered to local authorities rated Amber or Red.

As in previous years, any evidence-based estimates that are RAG rated Amber or Red will be automatically allocated a quality assurance verifier to attend the subsequent year's evidence-based estimate meeting.

You will find an example evidence-based estimate quality assurance form in the Resource Library on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage

Submitting the single figure

Once the estimate has been assessed by Homeless Link and the completed quality assurance form received by the local authority, they should submit the single figure and demographic data using the MHCLG's DELTA online system. See the DELTA Guidance in the on the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.

Data must be submitted to MHCLG by the local authority using DELTA no later than Friday 11th December 2026.

Evidence-based estimate, including a spotlight count

This section explains of how to organise an evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count, including a guidance video and links to any helpful documents. There are no changes to the evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count quality assurance (formerly verification) process this year, however the quality assurance form has been updated. Please see the 'New snapshot estimate quality assurance ratings and RAG ratings' section above for details.

Please refer to the above 'guide to the evidence-based estimate approach' section to arrange the estimate meeting aspect of your chosen approach.

Spotlight counts are a way to include count data alongside partner agency intelligence. This can be particularly effective for areas with people sleeping in a mix of urban and rural locations, or where there are a few hotspots with fluctuating numbers of people sleeping rough that require counting for accuracy.

All spotlight counts must take place after midnight. This is to take into account the night-time economy of the area. It may therefore mean that certain outreach shifts cannot be used as a spotlight count due to the timings of these shifts. Starting after midnight is required to avoid counting people who are part of wider street activity but have somewhere to stay and will not bed down for the night.

Except for starting after midnight, coordinators can decide to what extent a spotlight count follows the count process detailed above. At least one independent partner will need to attend the estimate meeting in order to be 'assured' by Homeless Link (please see the previous 'involving independent partners' section of this guidance. While involving independent partners in the spotlight count itself will lend that evidence more credibility, this may have resource implications for the independent partner and is therefore optional.

Please note, spotlight counts should only be used alongside other data sources – only choose the evidence-based estimate including a spotlight count approach if you are confident that there will actually be a range of different evidence sources (e.g. intelligence from park rangers or about rural sites, or from a day centre about hidden sites), as well as the spotlight count, from which you can arrive at an accurate snapshot figure. Otherwise, you should consider using a count-based estimate instead.

Follow the evidence-based estimates guidance, above, for the estimate meeting to take place after your 'typical' night chosen and include the spotlight count as one of your data sources. The spotlight count will need to take place on the 'typical' night you have chosen.

Pre-count activity

Please note that 'pre-counts' by outreach or police teams on the evening of the 'typical' night chosen should not be used, as they create a risk of disruption. See the 'pre-count activity' section above for further information.

Common issues to consider in your planning

- Changing approach. Areas are able to change approach but this should be led by intelligence. Homeless Link must be updated if you have changed approach as this can affect how the data needs to be assessed by a Homeless Link Quality Assurance Verifier.
- Further quality assurance. This is the additional assessment that takes place where a local authority has had to make a last-minute change of approach.
- Do you receive support from Rough Sleeping or Homelessness Advisers at MHCLG? If so, this should not have any effect on the annual snapshot estimates.
- Post-estimate meetings. Estimate meetings must not be held prior to the chosen 'typical' night. This will not provide accurate data, as you cannot predict who will be rough sleeping on the 'typical' night ahead.
- Evidence for estimate meetings. If you choose an evidence-based estimate, including a spotlight count approach the estimate meeting should discuss intelligence and evidence. If no additional information or data sources are discussed then essentially your approach will be an unverified count. Make it clear to partner agencies what evidence should be prepared and shared by them prior to the estimate meeting.
- Cross-LA coordination. We advise local authorities coordinate their date with neighbouring local authorities to avoid duplication of individuals being counted. However, we do not advise that you coordinate your choice of approach with neighbouring local authorities. Please read the section on the different approaches to choose the correct approach for your local authority.
- The timing of your spotlight count. Spotlight counts will not be verified if the count starts before midnight.

- The day of your 'typical' night. In previous years, Thursdays have been a popular choice of day to carry out the snapshot estimate. However, for some areas, there is a busy night-time economy on this night. Please consider if your area has a busier night-time economy on the day you have chosen, and if so, choose a different day.
- Pre-count activity. See the section on pre-count activity above.

Tips on intelligence gathering

Good intelligence gathering is essential to a successful rough sleeping snapshot estimate. This section contains tips for local authority leads, count coordinators and estimate meeting coordinators on intelligence gathering, working with partner agencies, organising and executing estimate meetings.

Consulting with local agencies

Local partner agencies should be consulted to discuss what intelligence they have about rough sleeping locally to check if there are any factors that might affect the choice of a 'typical' night for the estimate.

The local authority should involve those local agencies that will have the most accurate information about who is sleeping rough.

Local partner agencies could include:

- Outreach teams
- Advice agencies
- Hostels, day centres, night shelters
- Housing department
- Social Services, Youth Workers, Probation
- Police, community safety teams
- Health and mental health services
- Housing Associations
- Park rangers
- Faith groups, soup runs, street pastors
- Refuse collectors, town centre/local retail security/managements, street wardens.

How to consult

The local authority should arrange a meeting and invite local partners to contribute to the intelligence gathering process. If there is a local forum or network that brings together key homelessness agencies, such as a Rough Sleeping Action Group, this could be the starting point for consultation.

The multi-agency meeting should bring together the most accurate and up-to-date information on rough sleeping in order to make a decision on which approach to use.

In areas where there are very low numbers of people sleeping rough or where the local authority covers a large rural area, and where there is no existing multi-agency forum, the local authority may decide to carry out the consultation by telephone or email. In this case, the local authority should check with Homeless Link that this would meet the quality assurance (formerly verification) requirements. Homeless Link must still be contacted to arrange a quality assurance call.

See the template agenda, notes and information gathering form below to initiate the planning process for your snapshot estimate. Please note that a separate estimate meeting should be arranged after your chosen 'typical' night with partner agencies, to discuss intelligence and to arrive at a final snapshot figure, including demographic data.

Agenda and notes for an intelligence-gathering meeting

Welcome, introductions and apologies

- The Chair should open the meeting with a brief overview of the need to submit a snapshot figure and include local context about practice to date in terms of count-based estimates, evidence-based estimates, and evidence base estimates including a spotlight count.
- Ask each attendee to outline the role of their organisation in working with people sleeping rough and where their intelligence derives from.
- Chair to state who else has submitted data that will contribute to the overall estimate, if these parties are not in attendance.
- Agree the process and protocol for sharing sensitive information about clients. A template data protection protocol is provided in the Useful Forms and Other Resources' below.

Who to include in the snapshot estimate

- Explain the definition of rough sleeping and who this includes
- 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").

- Explain that the rough sleeping definition does not include people in hostels or shelters, individuals who are sofa-surfing, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes, organised protests, squatters, or Travellers.

- Discuss with the group that the snapshot estimate must only include those rough sleeping on the chosen 'typical' night, rather than a larger sample of street activity or people using homelessness services.
- Discuss any issues that arise around what constitutes sufficient evidence to include people who say they are rough sleeping but have never been seen doing so.
- Note that local authorities are also required to return demographic data on the number of women, men, under-18s, 18 -25s, 26 and over, and UK and non-UK nationals

Key hot spots and estimated numbers

Chair to ask each representative from the partner agencies to outline:

- Where they think the rough sleeping hotspots are in the local authority area.
- Their estimated number of people sleeping rough.
- Whether they think there has been any change in the extent or nature of rough sleeping since last year.
- Other information sources and data that can be taken into account, such as ongoing recording in a database for people sleeping rough, task and targeting groups, information from agencies such as police or probation, hostel and shelter lists.

The discussion then needs to take into account disagreements between agencies and to address issues of double counting (to include information on individuals, if appropriate data protection processes are in place).

Local authorities may agree to collate further information following this meeting or take additional steps to avoid double estimation between agencies.

If appropriate, the Chair can lead the group to discuss whether other data gathering is required on an ongoing basis.

Action: Local authority to decide which approach they will follow and agree the date of the 'typical' night. Partner agencies to understand the rough sleeping definition and what evidence is required.

Useful forms and other resources

This section of the [Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Resource Library](#) contains forms, templates, agendas, meeting facilitator notes and other guidance for local authorities to use to carry out count-based estimates and evidence-base estimate meetings. They are all designed to be a starting point and can be adapted for local use. Click on the links on the Toolkit webpage to access each template.

- Invite template for an intelligence gathering meeting
- Invite template for an estimate meeting

- Facilitator notes for an estimate meeting
- Data sharing protocol for estimating rough sleeping
- Using DELTA to submit your returns

Where to count and challenges to consider

Rural areas

It is logistically more difficult to carry out a count-based estimate 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 people sleeping rough on their own and they may be spread out over a large area. In such authorities, those carrying out the count cannot cover all possible sites and will have 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 farmland that cannot be accessed without prior permission and so are excluded from the count. Where resources make it difficult to carry out a count, local authorities should consider whether an evidence-based estimate will produce a more accurate figure. A spotlight count can be used as one of the intelligence sources, as long as it happens on the night chosen for the estimate.

Urban Areas

In cities and large towns, it is easier to carry out a single night count, as often people sleeping rough will be concentrated within a relatively small area and may congregate in groups for safety/community. However, there may be other challenges. Sleep sites may be hidden or inaccessible. There are safety issues involved in entering some possible locations for rough sleeping, such as derelict buildings and building sites – support may be needed from the Fire Service. 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 people actually sleeping rough. It may therefore be appropriate for the count to start later – in the early hours of the morning.

Under-representation of particular groups

There has been historic concern that a number of groups risk being under-represented in rough sleeping figures. This may include women, young people, and people who are LGBTQ+. For example, women are often hidden homeless and under-counted in rough sleeping counts. Women are particularly vulnerable to assault and exploitation when sleeping rough 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 in which the most vulnerable are likely to have concealed themselves. The involvement of police in street counts can be helpful in this situation, as long as any engagement is

approached sensitively. An evidence-based estimate may be more likely to include under-represented groups, especially if specialist agencies are involved e.g. LGBTQ+ charities.

Under-representation of people sleeping rough on public transport

Counts are likely to miss people sleeping rough using public transport as a place to sleep. Particularly in the winter and in metropolitan areas, a significant proportion of people are likely to take refuge on buses, trains, trams or tubes for warmth. Some services have formed partnerships with providers of public transport in order to carry out outreach work so that people sleeping rough can be identified and referred into services.

Care should be taken to establish if someone sleeping on public transport definitely fits the rough sleeping definition. There is a risk that people on buses or trains will be double counted as they move across local authority boundaries, unless comprehensive cross-boundary information sharing is in place. Due to these complications, people on public transport will usually fall outside the rough sleeping definition – if you plan to include people sleeping on public transport in your count, please discuss this with Homeless Link in advance.

Squats

Squatters are excluded from the definition of rough sleeping. However, there have been cases where it is unclear whether a sleep site falls under the definition of a squat or under the definition of ‘buildings or other places not designed for human habitation’, which includes people in derelict buildings. If there is any doubt about whether a site is a squat, please speak to Homeless Link for further guidance on a case by case basis: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk. It is not safe to enter these sites during a count so, where a rough sleeping site of this nature is identified, Coordinators will need to follow an evidence-based estimate approach (with or without a spotlight count) to include these people. The Fire Service may be able to assist with safety interventions as part of ongoing support and engagement.

Tents

People in campsites or other recreational settings, or sleeping in tents as part of an organised protest, do not fall within the definition of rough sleeping. However, a person sleeping in a tent elsewhere may meet the rough sleeping definition “actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments)”.

Coordinators should consider what access they need in order to count people sleeping tents and whether this can be achieved safely, particularly where the tents are on private land or in woodland.

Safeguarding is a concern in relation to tents, for example around child sexual exploitation and modern slavery/trafficking, where tents may be used as a base for sex work. There are also risks around drug use if people overdose while out of sight. The risk of Covid-19 infection may be increased by close proximity and lack of ventilation in

tents. Local authorities, outreach teams and police should work together outside of the count night to establish what is happening where tents are pitched – due to the safety risks and level of engagement required, this work should not be attempted during the count night.

Counters – where possible those with experience of outreach or other support work – will need to establish how many people are in a tent by calling out. The tent itself cannot be assumed to contain one or more people. If access to areas where tents are pitched is not possible, or if there are concerns about any risks posed by calling out to people in tents, coordinators should use the evidence-based estimate process (including a spotlight count if appropriate).

Charity sleep-outs

In some years, there have been charity sleep-out events taking place during the same period as the rough sleeping counts. While the sleep-out itself will fall outside the rough sleeping definition, there is the potential that this sort of event could disrupt local patterns of rough sleeping, meaning that it's no longer a typical night. Local authorities should check in with charity partners and look out for local promotion of sleep-out events, in order to avoid clashing dates. If there is an unavoidable clash, the count Quality Assurance Verifier will need additional information about the sleep-out (especially its location in relation to rough sleeping sites) before they can verify if it was still a typical night.

Cars, derelict boats and other places not designed for human habitation

The definition of rough sleeping includes: "People in buildings or other places not designed for human habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or bashes)." A 'bash' or 'bender' is a makeshift shelter structure e.g. wood and tarpaulins, often found in woods or alongside canal towpaths. A count-based estimate might not be the best way to find people sleeping rough in these locations, for example if someone parks in different locations each night or if it isn't safe to access a derelict boat or a barn. coordinators should use local intelligence to decide whether an evidence-based estimate (including a spotlight count as appropriate) would be more accurate by including people in these locations.

As with squats (see above), if coordinators have any questions about whether a site meets this part of the definition, please contact Homeless Link for clarification on a case-by-case basis: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk

Common scenarios and possible solutions

Since 2010, some questions have regularly cropped up, including whether to count individuals sleeping in caravans, boats and other unusual locations. No two situations are the same, but Homeless Link has put together a slide deck of the most common scenarios along with some suggestions as to how they can be approached. You will find this slide deck in the [Carrying Out Your Approach section of the Rough Sleeping Snapshot Estimates 2026 Toolkit](#) webpage.