

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

Frequently Asked Questions

[What is SWEP?](#)

[Is SWEP the same as winter shelters?](#)

[Is SWEP a legal requirement?](#)

[Who delivers SWEP?](#)

[Who decides when to open SWEP?](#)

[How does it work in London?](#)

[How long does SWEP stay open?](#)

[Where do SWEP staff come from?](#)

[Why aren't more empty buildings used as shelters?](#)

[Can SWEP be delivered year-round?](#)

[What are the rules for accessing SWEP?](#)

[How do I find out if my local SWEP is open?](#)

[How do I refer myself or someone else into SWEP?](#)

[Will SWEP open when a storm is forecast? What about heatwaves?](#)

[Who funds SWEP?](#)

[How do I set up or improve my local SWEP provision?](#)

[What is Homeless Link's role?](#)

Let's end homelessness together

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What is SWEP?

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) describes spaces opened as shelter for people sleeping rough when there is an increased risk of death due to the weather e.g. temperatures fall near or below freezing.

Is SWEP the same as winter shelters?

SWEP is a temporary response to a heightened risk. It is additional to winter shelters, because it is coordinated by the Local Authority (while many shelters are independent), may open at any time of year and does not have restrictions on access e.g. it is open to people with no recourse to public funds or with no local connection to the area in which they are sleeping rough.

Is SWEP a legal requirement?

There is no legal requirement for Local Authorities to provide shelter for everyone during severe weather. However, it is widely accepted that there is a humanitarian obligation to provide SWEP and prevent death.

Who delivers SWEP?

The Local Authority commissions SWEP. The provider varies depending on the local context of services and housing supply. For example, sometimes SWEP forms part of a wider contract (e.g. an expectation that communal space in a hostel will be opened as SWEP when needed); it may be via B&Bs or hotels; or spot purchasing of beds in shelters or hostels.

Who decides when to open SWEP?

Each Local Authority is responsible for opening SWEP, and in some areas (e.g. London and some regions with metro mayors) there is additional coordination. There is no national coordination or real-time tracking of SWEP.

How does it work in London?

As well as individual borough responses, the Greater London Assembly (GLA) commissions pan-London 'overflow' SWEP beds that open when London-wide SWEP has been activated and local SWEPs reach capacity. For further information on London see: www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/housing-and-land/homelessness/mayors-rough-sleeping-services#acc-i-50612

How long does SWEP stay open?

It's up to the Local Authority. Some SWEPs will open for a single night and close as soon as the weather improves slightly, whereas others have a protocol that includes minimum opening e.g. three nights. Some SWEPs make a commitment to offering shelter until the people accessing SWEP have been offered a route off the street, which might be a bed in a non-emergency shelter or hostel, or a longer term offer of housing.

Where do SWEP staff come from?

SWEPs often rely on extending existing capacity, so hostel staff will also coordinate SWEP and support guests in their communal areas in addition to their normal workload. Some areas have budget for temporary staff, or for B&B provision. A smaller number use volunteers, but it's hard to maintain a bank of volunteers because it isn't possible to predict when SWEP will open.

Why aren't more empty buildings used as shelters?

Empty buildings are not usually equipped to act as shelters. Overnight shelters require toilets, heating, secure storage for belongings, and space for beds/mattresses (preferably with separate spaces for men and women). Ideally there will be showers, laundry, cooking facilities, space to sit and eat, and somewhere for confidential conversations. There are also considerations around access (e.g. steps), location (e.g. is it near daytime services), and whether people will feel safe, in terms of both the state of repair and lay-out of the building.

Where councils and charities try to open shelters in empty buildings, it can be impossible to get planning permission when residents or businesses object to a shelter opening in their neighbourhood, even temporarily.

So, while the use of empty buildings is an important option, it is not a quick win.

Can SWEP be delivered year-round?

SWEP is an emergency response and relies on people going above and beyond their usual roles, or using options that are only affordable in the short term (e.g. B&B/hotels). It creates pressure on other services, which means other people may receive lower quality of support, increasing their risk of street homelessness. For these reasons it should only be used as a short term measure.

Every area should work to establish year-round routes for people to access accommodation in order to prevent rough sleeping. This could be extended shelter provision or, preferably, access to supported housing or independent accommodation that can end a person's homelessness for good.

Some people don't want to stay in communal shelters and may choose to stay on the streets until a longer term option is offered, such as moving directly into a flat. There are also people who might be barred from accessing standard provision, e.g. because they have no recourse to public funds. For this reason, there is a need to maintain SWEP responses even if there is also extended winter provision or year-round shelters.

What are the rules for accessing SWEP?

Each provision has its own rules, often shaped by the type of provision and the availability of skilled support workers. The purpose of SWEP is to house everyone, so there shouldn't be any restrictions on eligibility. Where SWEP is communal and someone is at higher risk (either to or from others), the local authority should be flexible about alternative options e.g. spot purchasing a B&B room instead.

How do I find out if my local SWEP is open?

It's the responsibility of the Local Authority to promote SWEP. There is no national coordination or real-time tracking. Check your council's website and social media. The StreetLink London website: www.streetlink.london/ is updated to show when the pan-London SWEP is open. Note that individual London boroughs may also open SWEP independently when the pan-London provision is not activated.

How do I refer myself or someone else into SWEP?

This varies, but all Local Authorities in England receive StreetLink referrals: www.streetlink.org.uk/. StreetLink is a national service – anyone can make a referral via the website or app, which is passed to the relevant local team. Some areas will also publicise details of local referral routes (e.g. a number to call or a place to go to), so it's worth checking your council's website and social media for details. In London, SWEP referrals are made via StreetLink.

Will SWEP open when a storm is forecast? What about heatwaves?

This is up to the Local Authority and varies across the country. While we are seeing increasing flexibility, many areas still only activate SWEP for freezing weather.

Who funds SWEP?

The Local Authority, for example using Homelessness Grant or Rough Sleeping Initiative funding – see our survey report for more on funding sources: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-severe-weather-emergency-protocol-swep-and-extended-weather-provision

How do I set up or improve my local SWEP provision?

Homeless Link's guidance and annual survey of provision sets out the models and approaches relevant to delivering SWEP. You can also contact Homeless Link for support: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-severe-weather-emergency-protocol-swep-and-extended-weather-provision

What is Homeless Link's role?

As part of Homeless Link's MHCLG funded work, we carry out a survey each year to explore trends in how SWEP is provided and look for examples of good practice. We also publish guidance about SWEP, and provide informal support to Local Authorities and voluntary sector providers to help improve the extent and quality of SWEP provision.

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