Verification and other pathways into rough sleeping services

A write up of findings from our focus group

Overview

In May 2023, Homeless Link facilitated a focus group to explore views on rough sleeping verification.[1] The aim of the focus group was to:

- learn from frontline organisations in the homelessness sector across England about different models of verification
- understand where verification is not used, what is done instead to enable access into rough sleeping services
- hear from people with lived experience about their views and experiences of verification
- discuss who verification serves and doesn't serve
- share good practice amongst peers and organisations.

Twenty-three individuals attended the focus group. Sixteen worked in the voluntary and community sector, four worked for local authorities, and a further three had lived experience of homelessness. The graph below shows the breakdown of attendees by region.
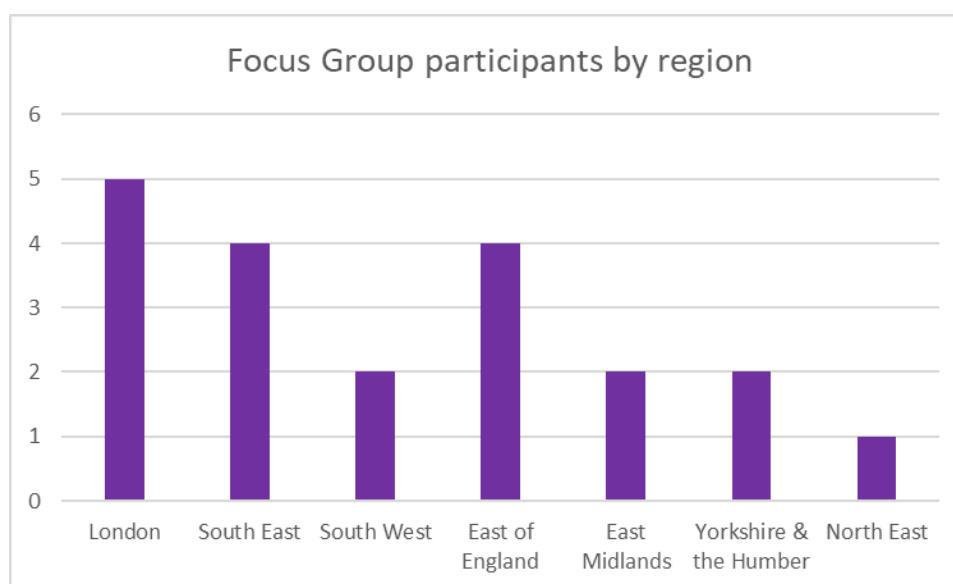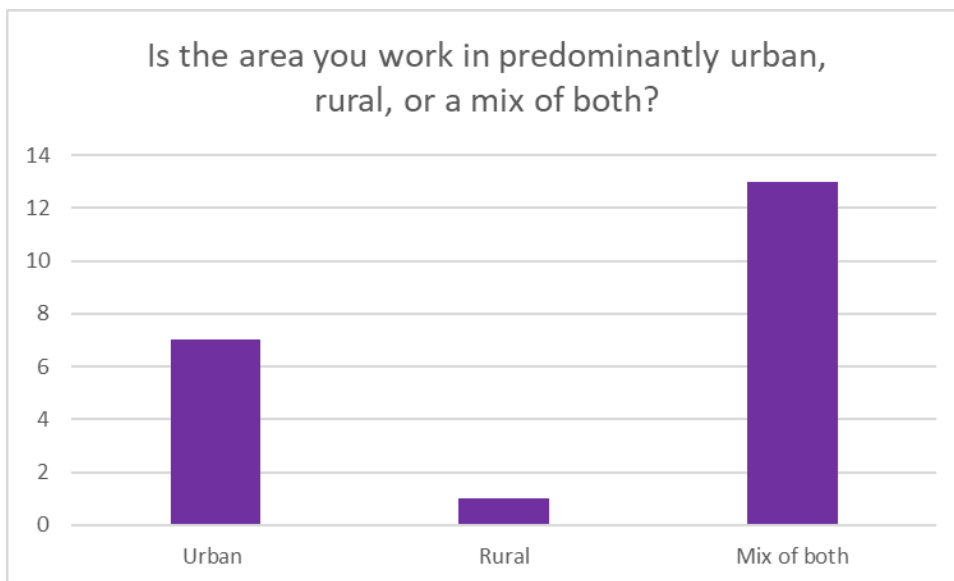

This resource collates key findings and opinions shared within the focus group.

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[1] By verification, we mean the process of observing people sleeping rough in order for them to access specific rough sleeping accommodation and support pathways.

Who verifies?

We began by exploring whether and where verification was a requirement of the work delivered by focus group participants, and if so, what that meant in practice.

Is verification a requirement for accessing rough sleeping services in your area?

Response	Value
Yes	19
No	2

Is the area you work in predominantly urban, rural, or a mix of both?

Response	Value
Urban	7
Rural	1
Mix of both	13

Overall, most participants (90%) responded that in their area, there was some sort of verification process related to working with people sleeping rough. But what this looked like in practice varied, sometimes greatly, across the participants.

By and large, verification tended to be a criterion for referring people into rough sleeper accommodation support:

"Verification is required for accessing rough sleeping accommodation and support."

"Verification is also required for accessing accommodation support in this area."

In relation to this, some participants described a 'two-tier' system where verified individuals have access to more services/accommodation options than non-verified people, which they felt made the process of moving away from the streets easier for their verified clients.

"Rough sleepers are generally encouraged to be verified as more is available to them when they are. It is more straightforward."

For some participants, this 'two-tier' system also meant the dedicated rough sleeper accommodation in their area could be ring-fenced for those in 'verified' need:

"… due to limited provision that may be overwhelmed by sofa surfers. Without verification it always worries me that someone might say they are rough sleeping when they are not and take resource from those who really need it."

However, other participants expressed that the need to verify people sleeping rough could, unintentionally, create barriers to them accessing the very rough sleeping services ring-fenced for them. This was due to rules about the time-lapse, since initial verification eventually disqualifies people sleeping rough from eligibility in some cases:

"…if they verify someone on a day in which a NSNO hub is full, they will never then be able to access a NSNO hub. This means that outreach workers will sometimes not verify when they know a hub is full and wait to verify when the hub has vacancies."

Some participants also felt that the verification requirement could be mis-applied. For example, participants described how a local authority homeless/housing team would not support a given individual until they were verified, whereas priority need should have applied:

"He was a man with physical disability and in a wheelchair, unable to get support from the council until the outreach team verified them as 'bedded down' (bedded down vs in a wheelchair!)"

Beyond solely accommodation services, some participants explained that in their area verification was also a requirement for accessing support from other agencies.

"Verification is needed to access some supported accommodation and statutory services, and to get 'the ball rolling' in terms of support: accessing multi-disciplinary support from drug and alcohol services, probation, rough sleeping nurses, housing support and general support from the outreach team."

However, some participants also talked about additional services available to 'non-verified' rough sleepers:

"… non-verified rough sleepers can still access day centres and food banks."

Who doesn't verify?

Only 2 focus group participants said that verification did not exist or was not a requirement for accessing rough sleeper support services in their area. Such areas still had rough sleeper outreach teams providing support to individuals on the street, but there was an established process and pathway for anyone to seek accommodation support. In one of the areas, outreach workers were afforded discretionary decision-making and were not required to see people bedded down before referring them into accommodation and support services. They could make decisions based on their professional judgement and the balance of probabilities. These areas were characterised by a mix of city and rural space.

"We don't have rough sleeper verification. We were expected to do so for a time during Everyone In, which was a disaster. We work with a rough sleeping prevention service team who focus on sofa surfers, those at imminent risk of rough sleeping or who are new to rough sleeping but don't have support needs. The accommodation options on offer tend not to be the same (mostly PRS) but it is the same offer of support & is accessible without having been verified."

What does verification mean?

What verification meant in practice varied significantly across the focus group participants. Some participants talked about an "extremely strict set of rules". For example, individuals needing to be seen to meet a strict definition of rough sleeping e.g., not "sat up, eating a sandwich", within a specified timeframe (overnight), in order be verified.

Participants reported that further problems could arise where verification requirements varied across neighbouring areas. They felt that this made it difficult for individuals to know what they needed to do to meet verification criteria and it therefore took longer to get them into accommodation and support.

"The definition of rough sleeping can vary from place to place. When you've done outreach for a while you know who is rough sleeping and [...] there are people who live a rough sleeping lifestyle but are in a car or tent and aren't classed as a rough sleeper."

In contrast, some participants described a process of being authorised to use their discretion and professional judgement to conclude whether an individual should be verified as a sleeping rough. In some areas, this was a permissive way of working, in

others, it was specifically integrated into the defined outreach and verification processes:

"They (local authorities) are not as strict although they do like people to be verified. They will accept if an outreach worker has assessed someone as rough sleeping. I feel that this really works. It means that people don't have another night out on the streets. The outreach workers tend to know if someone is rough sleeping or not."

"Someone is verified when the outreach team observe the individual, BUT ALSO assumed verification when 'reason to believe' criteria are met. This is when the outreach team 1. have engaged with reported rough sleeper on multiple occasions and their observations during these contacts leave them to believe the person is in fact rough sleeping, or 2. have intelligence from agencies such as Housing /Homelessness section, police, partners etc., that collaborate with them, to believe the individual is in fact rough sleeping."

Some participants also talked about a liminal space in which an individual should normally be seen and meet a set definition for verification, but where the outreach workers tended to verify based on their professional judgement instead. This was especially the case with more marginalised individuals. Participants broadly viewed such working outside the established process as positive:

"Everyone's story is different. Not everyone is on the ground rough sleeping. We need to have understanding. As an outreach worker, when you know, you know. We know the hotspots as well. I am a believer in bending the rules."

But some also mentioned the risk of verification requirements being applied unequally.

"'If your face fits' you can get around it."

Views on verification

We asked focus group participants whether they believed verification to be a positive or negative thing, with 52% of participants saying positive, and 48% negative. However, it should be noted that many said they would have ticked both positive and negative if this had been an option.

For those who believed there to be positive aspects of verification, several key themes emerged from discussions. For those working in local authorities, funding was tied to verification and therefore statistics acted as a tool to track changes over time. It was felt by some that verification ensured teams were working with those on the streets, which helped to target efforts to support people with the right priority. In addition, the services and pathways accessible once an individual is verified have been designed for people who are rough sleeping and therefore, it was felt that without verification, people could enter a pathway which was not necessarily designed for them. For those participants

working in larger cities, it was believed that the verification process was needed as a large percentage or referrals came from the general public. They felt that the verification process was also a process of outreach:

"It is more than verification. It is checking in on people's welfare. Trying to reach out. There is value in the process. When we go out to verify people, we signpost them to the right place, we see their living conditions, and understand their needs better."

However, those who felt positively about verification also recognised the need for flexibility and trust in outreach workers, and that it was a tool which didn't tell the whole story.

"What we do know is that verification is a moment in time and doesn't represent the whole story. If we measure our success only in numbers, we don't see where people flow on and off the street, where people return, where people face tenancy evictions and abandonments – and we don't know what happens in between or why some people remain on the streets longer."

There were some strong negative feelings about verification in the group, from both people working in the homelessness sector and from people with lived experience of homelessness. It was described by some as a blunt tool, with the word 'verification' being seen as very procedural.

Some people felt that using verification as a method of gatekeeping access to rough sleeping services ultimately begins the support journey from a place of distrust, which can be hugely damaging for individuals trying to access services. Legally, to prove homelessness the bar is low, so it was felt that rough sleeping verification is an artificial and unnecessary hurdle to accessing support, with too high a burden of proof on the individual experiencing homelessness. It was discussed how people should be trusted to be telling the truth about rough sleeping when they say they are. Although there may be a small risk of some people 'playing' the system, overall, this risk is far outweighed by the positives that result from support being based on trust.

"If you build a system based on funder demands, rather than the needs of those with experience of homelessness, that system is designed to fail. The system should be client focussed."

Participants discussed the risks of verification being misused if services were too hard-line, with verification meaning different things in different areas and there not being one uniform definition or criteria. For some areas, it was found that quite often councils would use verification as a way of delaying support due to having limited resources. Some participants recalled that individuals had been told by council workers to sleep rough, and be verified, in order to access housing.

A further complicating factor raised by outreach workers in the group was that often they don't find people 'bedded down', but this didn't mean they weren't sleeping rough. Verification can be a slow process with people falling off referral lists and out of sight whilst waiting to be helped, especially when there is a lack of communication between services.

"People move on from their sleep site because of the weather, their safety, or for all sorts of reasons. This means that people don't get verified, which may cause a delay in them receiving support."

It was also discussed how safe places to sleep, for example, McDonalds, police stations, A&E, are places where outreach workers can't verify people as sleeping rough.

"We had someone sleeping rough in a prayer room and I had to fight with my managers to do a housing application for them as a rough sleeper. People fall through the cracks that way."

Which groups aren't served by using a verification system?

We polled participants, asking the question, 'Do you think the following groups are well served by having a verification process for accessing rough sleeping services?' The graph below shows the results of this poll:
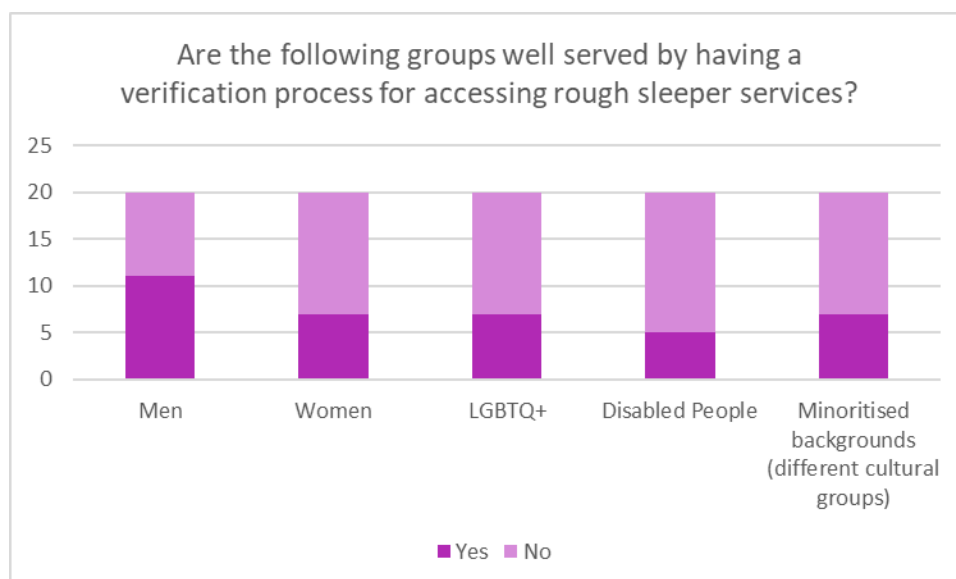
Participants described a blanket approach to verification and access to rough sleeping services, with no programme or team targeting specific groups or demographics. This 'one size fits all' approach to verification was not seen by participants as inclusive. The

group agreed that people are multi-faceted and often fall into more than one of the groups identified above; not enough services consider the intersectionality of homelessness. It was felt that those groups identified as not being served by verification are likely to be underserved across all sectors and more likely to have increased support needs.

The group felt that women were not served by having verification as a way of accessing rough sleeping services. Women are more likely to be 'hidden homeless'. Further, when they do sleep rough, women are often well-hidden as their express purpose is to remain invisible for their own safety. Some women may be sex working, or staying at someone's house in exchange for sex and therefore unlikely to be found verifiably bedded down at night but may be sleeping rough during the day.[2]

"*Verification can be straightforward for some, very hard for others - women, people that are very vulnerable... they don't want to be visible."*

The group discussed how we need to be mindful of hidden disabilities when we talk about disability and homelessness. For example, for people who are neurodivergent, being approached by outreach workers on the street may be incredibly challenging, and they may not wish to engage. Non-engagement and not being verified may then be seen as refusal of support and therefore individuals may continue to rough sleep.[3]

For marginalised groups, in particular, those with restricted eligibility due to their immigration status[4], it was felt that without being able to offer suitable accommodation options or a route off the street, individuals are less likely to engage with outreach workers, and therefore they may remain unverified. It was also noted that migrant communities are more likely to be fearful of being reported to the Home Office, and therefore likely to remain hidden homeless. Participants mentioned barriers in engaging with people where English was not their first language, resulting in them falling through the gaps of support.

"We have translation services but these need to be booked in advance. It's not reactive."

For the LGBTQ+ community, it was discussed how there are very limited LGBTQ+ specific services for people experiencing homelessness. People from this community are more likely to experience bullying and hate crime, and therefore choose to remain hidden. It was agreed that the verification process does not serve LGBTQ+ and the lack of specific

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[2] More information on women's homelessness can be found on our website: https://homeless.org.uk/areas-of-expertise/meeting-diverse-needs/ending-womens-homelessness/

[3] See our webinar and toolkit on learning disabilities and homelessness for more information: https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/learning-disabilities-and-homelessness-toolkit/ as well as the Autism and Homelessness Toolkit: https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/autism-and-homelessness/

[4] See our guidance on supporting people with uncertain or restricted eligibility due to their immigration status: https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/supporting-people-with-restricted-eligibility-due-to-their-immigration-status/

services means that even if someone is verified, they are less likely to engage with mainstream support.

Ideal pathways

As a final area for discussion, we asked participants what elements they thought an ideal pathway into rough sleeper accommodation support should include. Again, the responses were varied, covering a range of approaches from adequate prevention to trust-based approaches, choice, and multi-disciplinary working.

Co-production

Whatever an ideal pathway in to support services for people sleeping rough might look like, participants agreed that it should be designed, evaluated, and assessed in co-production with people with lived experience of rough sleeping. There was agreement that neither the medical approach, where things are done *to* people, nor the charity approach, where things are done *for* people, are ideal solutions. The statutory approach needs to be *with* people, or to involve allowing people to do things for themselves. As one participant put it:

"When we move to a social model where things are done with people, we will be closer to a more human service."

Humanity

One theme that came through strongly from participants with lived experience of homelessness was that an ideal solution was one that was constantly mindful of the humanity of people sleeping rough; they are neither 'victims' of circumstance nor 'to blame' for where they find themselves, still less are they mere data points on outcomes reports. Rather, those being supported should be seen as unique individuals and worked *with* to access solutions that are co-produced with, not imposed onto, people experiencing homelessness.

Trust

Trust and the elimination of gatekeeping were talked about as being foundational to any ideal pathway. This included responding within a brief window of time with an offer of quick, efficient, trust-based support at the point of need. Participants also felt there needed to be recognition that decisions don't have to be permanent, i.e., if you find out someone isn't homeless down the line, you can withdraw support. It should be kept in mind that there is a risk of gatekeeping through verification impacting the important trust that services need to build with someone sleeping rough to engage them in support. Therefore, in an ideal pathway, trust should be assumed. As one participant put it:

"Ideally, an ideal pathway would trust people when they say that are homeless and does not include verification, but I don't know how realistic this is."

This was reiterated by other participants, who said:

"There's not many people that pretend to be rough sleeping. People are in crisis, and they come for help, and we should be looking at that first and foremost. If there does have to be further investigation, that should be done with people in accommodation."

"99% of people who present as homeless are homeless – they might not tick every box and they might not be on the street, but they might be unsafely housed or sofa surfing."

Prevention

Several participants felt that any need to verify people sleeping rough could be superseded by better prevention systems and services to support people who are at risk but not yet on the streets (e.g., at point of eviction, when sofa surfing). Local authority participants working in areas that are already well resourced for prevention activity described this as "a game changer", enabling their outreach team to focus on those few who became street homeless despite prevention efforts. However, other participants talked about the limitations of their local authority's approach to prevention, including a lack of persistence when attempting to engage individuals who may not accept support straightaway.

Multiplicity

Some participants felt there may be no one *ideal* pathway for those being supported away from sleeping rough. Rather, they recognised the changing profile of the people they are finding during outreach and the need for specialist and adequate accommodation options as a result. This would include, for example, spaces that accommodated people with dogs or other pets, people on the sex offenders register, couples, and so on. One participant said:

"There is no one ideal pathway, we need a number of routes that recognise different people's needs. The profile of people who have slept rough has changed over the years and what we can offer needs to reflect that."

Other participants agreed with this position and reiterated that access to more and better accommodation options was essential to any ideal pathway:

"Without suitable move-on accommodations, we can't have an ideal pathway."

"We have a priority need client that we can't place anywhere due to him having a dog. We also have increasing numbers of rough sleepers who are on the sex offenders register and,

in our area, lots of housing schemes have a blanket ban on housing people who are on that list. It is becoming more and more difficult to house couples."

"People know. They know that there won't be supported accommodation accepting dogs. They know there won't be accommodation accepting sex workers. They know that there won't be accommodation suitable for a wheelchair user. So, they are not engaging with the outreach team. They don't trust us anymore".

Included in this was a call for more of what was referred to as winter-type accommodation - e.g., direct access or low threshold emergency provision - year around "s*o that people just don't sleep in the street".* This also extended to the removal of any verification criteria to access emergency accommodation during periods when SWEP[5] (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) was active.

Diversity

Some participants reflected that it's important to recognise where people may not necessarily want or feel comfortable accepting support from mainstream rough sleeper services. In this regard, any ideal pathway should involve support being offered through more specialised access points such as day services specifically geared towards supporting different communities, reactive translation services, specialist outreach nurses, and specialist outreach staff for engaging with women etc. For example:

"Rather than having to jump through additional hoops try to find the right LGBT service to make the right advocacy on your behalf. There should be community centres, LGBT centres, with skilled workers built into service. We need long term funding for these services."

Multi-disciplinary working

Alongside choice, trust and diversity, participants also talked about an ideal pathway for people sleeping rough being one characterised by networks, joint-approaches, multidisciplinary teams and holistic ways of working.

"Verification is something that happens in the system. We can't just talk about verification without talking about the whole system."

Participants talked about any ideal pathway being one that foregrounded multidisciplinary working between services across the board from grassroots to statutory. One local authority was held up as being "really effective in reducing rough sleeper numbers because of joint work, sharing information, person centred work, built on trust".

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[5] Read our guidance on cold weather provision & SWEP: https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/guidance-on-cold-weather-provision-swep-and-heatwaves/

Participants also suggested that better multidisciplinary working also meant outreach teams could avoid repetitive approaches such as the same workers visiting the same sites or locations on every shift. They added that there are some good examples of involving social workers and mental health workers in outreach, thereby offering alternative perspectives on providing services to clients. However, there was a recognition by participants that adult social care and some mental health services can be reluctant to work with the rough sleeping cohort.

With that said, some participants were clear in their view that an ideal multi-disciplinary pathway should not extend to include the police or similar agencies, saying: *"no more bringing police and bodyguards while doing verification!"*.

Further, some participants felt such networks and multidisciplinary working were especially important in areas of low or dispersed population, for example, predominantly rural areas, where it was acknowledged you wouldn't have lots of different services acting as a point of access for those in need of help. Hence, it is especially important to ensure people and teams are linked up and working together.

Summary & next steps

As can be seen, there were varied views on rough sleeping verification across the focus group participants. However, a common theme emerged; there needs to be scope for flexibility of process in order to fully serve all groups of individuals. Flexibility would help to ensure that those who need support can receive it in a timely manner, rather than verification superseding support for vulnerable people.

Applying professional judgement and using a multi-disciplinary approach means those who are more likely to remain hidden, and less able to engage in the verification process, can be supported to move away from the streets.

However, it must be noted that at present verification is used in some areas as a way of gatekeeping access to accommodation services that are specifically funded to work with people sleeping rough. This is due to limited funding and therefore availability of such services. In some areas it seems this gatekeeping has filtered out into other types of support services. Those working with people sleeping rough should understand the law and duties of local authorities to accommodate so they are able to advocate for access, regardless of whether the individual has been verified.

Further, there is a clear need for more, and more specialist services and accommodation options. This means recognising people's diverse needs, acknowledging the intersectionality of homelessness, and co-producing services, and the pathways for accessing them with people with lived experience.

Information from this focus group will inform the development of further information for those providing services for people sleeping rough, including a set of core principles for outreach work.

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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