

Counts & Estimates Toolkit 2018

Counts process

Let's end homelessness together

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Full toolkit available at:

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/counts-and-estimates-evaluating-extent-of-rough-sleeping

Introduction

This guidance will help you to carry out a count. For further information on deciding whether to count or estimate, please see the Introduction section of the toolkit.

There is currently no national mechanism for recording every person who sleeps rough in England. The snapshot methodology aims to get as accurate a representation of the number of people sleeping rough as possible, while acknowledging that each process has its limitations. The evaluation method is chosen to meet the local context: counts are based on visible rough sleeping, and evidence-based estimates on a range of sources for rough sleeping.

Counts should follow this toolkit so that they are as accurate and consistent as possible, and can reasonably be compared across regions, local authority areas and over time.

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

Sub-regional partnerships between local authorities enable a co-ordinated approach across traditional local authority boundaries, ensuring that frontline provision prevents single homelessness and rough sleeping. Local authorities within sub-regional partnerships or in neighbouring areas should work together to coordinate the count date in order to avoid any duplication of people who bed down in different local authority areas and to ensure that the data collected informs work planning.

Local authorities must involve Homeless Link to verify the process and single figure and to share demographic data (see below). The single figure is submitted to MHCLG by 14^h December. See the DELTA guidance for further information:

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/counts-and-estimates-evaluating-extent-of-rough-sleeping

The Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI)

The Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) is a targeted fund for local authorities with high numbers of people sleeping rough. Local areas who received RSI funding this year are required to submit monthly reports (including detail about their rough sleeping population) and conduct a rough sleeping street count in September, January and March. The RSI rough sleeping figures are not official statistics and are not independently verified by Homeless Link.

RSI areas should submit their annual snapshot figure and demographic data for the official rough sleeping statistics using the method that will most accurately reflect the number of people sleeping rough in their area.

Who will be counted?

For the purpose of the count, 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”).

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

Homeless Link became aware during last year's counts that outreach teams are seeing increasing numbers of people in transitional public spaces such as hospital waiting rooms, stations and on public transport. People using these spaces aren't always included under the definition of rough sleeping, because they are not bedded down, and are instead there for safety as a sit-up space overnight. In this situation it can be hard to know for sure who is homeless and often it isn't possible or desirable to approach everyone. This year, Homeless Link's Verifiers will ask Coordinators about anyone seen who did not meet the definition but falls into this 'grey area' of the definition. This will inform future work.

Collecting demographic data

Since 2015, the counts and estimates statistics have included additional demographic data on the numbers of women, men, under-18s, under-25s, and British, EU and non-EU 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 single figure. MHCLG will publish the data.

Where demographic information is not known (for example, because someone has not shared their personal details with agencies) this will also be noted for each category. The demographic data is collected as an indication of the representation of particular groups among people who are sleeping rough.

Early September

Choosing the date and time

The local authority lead gives responsibility for the count process to a Count Coordinator, for example a rough sleeping coordinator, Housing Options manager or outreach team leader.

Allow at least 6 weeks to plan the count, which will take place on one night between 1st October and 30th November. The last possible date is the night of 29th into the morning of 30th November.

Activities leading up to the count will include:

- Gathering intelligence from partners
- Preparing a data protection statement
- Organising volunteers
- Planning the night's activities
- Liaising with the police
- Arranging a Homeless Link verifier.

The count must take place on a single night. If it spread 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.

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 night time economy, start time of 2am or even later is more appropriate so that people sleeping rough who bed down after pubs and clubs close are still counted.

Counts should be completed by 5am but 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.

In most cases, if appropriate intelligence has been gathered and enough volunteers recruited, counts take no more than 2 to 3 hours to conduct. Some local authorities conduct a street needs audit prior to the night of the count to gather this intelligence.

Early / mid-September

Recruiting counters

Many local authorities look for volunteers from their own workforce (awarding time off in lieu or overtime) as well as looking for volunteer counters from the local statutory and voluntary sector or faith 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, as this strengthens the credibility of the count. Homeless Link may not be able to verify counts which do not involve independent partners.

If local authorities would like to invite local churches to be involved in the count, contact Mark Brennan at Housing Justice: m.brennan@housingjustice.org.uk

All those involved in the count should be asked not to share the date beyond essential contacts.

Organising a verifier

Counts need to be verified to ensure that they have been carried out safely and in accordance with this guidance. Verifiers are trained and supported by Homeless Link. They are associates or volunteers drawn from our staff, membership, partners, other local providers and the local community. The verifier’s role is to take part and observe the count, not to organise it. The verifier can double up as a counter in the team that will return to base first.

To book a trained verifier, email Homeless Link at: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk as soon as possible and at least one month before the planned count date. Coordinators must communicate with the verifier before and during the count. It is the Coordinator's responsibility to confirm the date, time and venue of the count in advance with the verifier. If the verifier has not replied to confirm their attendance at least two weeks before the count, please alert Homeless Link's Counts & Estimates Project Manager.

DELTA online data collection system

Please check that you are signed up to the MHCLG's DELTA online data collection system (if you previously submitted data by Excel, you should already have received an email from MHCLG about this).

See the DELTA guidance:

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/counts-and-estimates-evaluating-extent-of-rough-sleeping

Mid-September – count night

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, we recommend using 'night of into morning of' to ensure clarity about the date and aid travel/work planning e.g. night of Weds 15th into morning of Thurs 16th.

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 estimate process (which can include a count) to achieve greater accuracy.

Count 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.

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 base of operations to deal with queries and check in with counting teams during the night.

Note that the Verifier has to be in the first team to return to the base.

Plan ahead to gain access to non-public areas where people may be bedded down (e.g. hospital or college grounds, parks, building stairwells). 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 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. Please refer to the Count Forms & Resources section of the toolkit for further information.

Preparing a data protection statement

The Count Coordinator should provide copies of a data protection statement on the night of the count, in case it is requested or to assist the person doing the count to answer any questions. The GDPR lists the kinds of information that must be provided. See the 'Data sharing' section below.

Making contingency plans – emergency accommodation and SWEP¹

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. They will still count towards the single figure even if housed during 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 count coordinator, in consultation with the verifier, may decide on one of the following courses of action:

- Postpone the count – it still has to happen by 30th November
- Proceed with the count and use it to inform an estimate, based on actual numbers counted plus the number of people in SWEP provision on the night of the count who would otherwise have slept rough.²
- Cancel the count and instead follow the estimate process, based on a single typical night where SWEP is not in force.

2 weeks before the count

Information to/from counters, Verifier and police

Confirm availability of counters and Verifier, their contact details and addresses. Ensure there is a plan for everyone to get home safely – it is the Coordinator's responsibility to provide transport for counters and Verifier. Depending on the start time and location of the base of operations, 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 'Guidance for count volunteers' to the counters along with details of the date ('night of x into morning of y' 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.

¹ Guidance on cold weather provision and SWEP:

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/guidance-on-severe-weather-emergency-protocol-swep-and-extended-weather-provision

² If an estimate is submitted on the basis of a count alongside actual number placed in SWEP, assessment and intelligence information must be used to ensure that only those people who would have slept rough on that night are counted, which might be different to the total number of people in SWEP

Speak with the Verifier to talk through the plan for the count. Notify Police of the count.

The week of the count

Practical preparations

Ensure that you are ready for count night:

- Check the weather forecast and review SWEP contingency plan
- Book taxis to/from venue for counters and verifier
- 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
- 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
- Assign counters to teams, including an outreach worker or someone with local knowledge in each team. Put the Verifier in the team that will return first or arrange for them to be picked up and brought back to base before any counting teams return.

The night of the count

Count process

- Check availability of NSNO or other emergency accommodation/assessment on the night
- Meet the Verifier slightly earlier than the counters to run through plan for the night
- Ensure each counting team has a mobile, torch and pack – check you have the right mobile numbers
- Talk through the Coordinator's Briefing for Counters, introduce the Verifier and answer any questions
- Agree timing of check-in calls to teams during the count
- As each team returns, show their count form to the Verifier
- If possible, offer hot drinks/snacks at the base of operations
- Agree a final figure and demographic information with the Verifier once all forms have been returned
- Check that each counter and the verifier 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.

In order 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 based on observation or noted 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. 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.
- 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.
- Safe transport from (and potentially to) the base of operations is the 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 aggression or anger from people sleeping rough or others.

Please also refer to the Count Risk Assessment (for coordinators) and Health & Safety Checklist (for counters) in the Count Forms & Resources section of this toolkit.

Briefing the counters

The Count Coordinator should start the evening at the base of operations with refreshments and a briefing session for counters. The briefing is to ensure that everyone understands:

- The definition of sleeping rough
- The role of the Count Coordinator and the Verifier
- Any local arrangements for recording detail of individual people sleeping rough (MHCLG only require the single figure) and support/accommodation options on the night
- Safety considerations, as listed above

Please also refer to Coordinator's Briefing Notes in the Count Forms & Resources section of this 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 a No Second Night Out service, 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 can't be woken, leave a letter or card to let them know how they can contact the outreach team, local authority or other forms of support.

Recording the data

On the night of the count, local authorities should use the Rough Sleeping Count Form (see Forms & Resources section) or devise a form for local use if required. The local authority should ask counters to collect any data about individuals, trends or hotspots that will be relevant to inform local planning. The Homeless Link Verifier will ask about these plans, as well as verifying basic demographic data on gender, age and nationality.

- Counters should record each individual person on a separate line on the form, rather than writing totals on the form as this 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 should attempt to wake each individual to record their details. If it isn't possible to wake them, counters may be able to record gender and an estimate of age based on observation. Even if the counter cannot observe or establish any details about the individual (for example because they are unable to wake them and they are covered up) they should still record them individually. It may be helpful to request police assistance with waking individuals, bearing in mind that people might not appreciate being disturbed.
- It's important to try and establish the identity of a person sleeping rough on the night of the count as this will help with follow-up and referrals following the count. However, note the data protection rules below.
- The count process includes collecting data on the number of EU (excluding UK) and non-EU migrants represented among people sleeping rough. To plan local responses for migrants sleeping rough see Homeless Link's guidance: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/working-with-eea-migrants and www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/supporting-people-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds. 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.
- 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: http://languages.refugeecouncil.org.uk/top_navigation/Language_ID_chart.htm
- It's useful for counters to give as much information as possible on the location of people sleeping rough, as this may help with the future planning of services, as well as more immediate offers of support.
- Forms must be completed on the night of the count and returned to the Count Coordinator on that night for verification.
- If demographic data changes (e.g. new information comes to light) inform Homeless Link.
- 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

- As holder and owner of the personal data collected, the local authority is the data controller. It is their responsibility to ensure that the correct procedures are in place to adhere to the Data Protection Act 2018.

- Neither Homeless Link nor MHCLG are data controllers in this process, as no personal data is shared with either organisation.
- 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 can still be recorded as sleeping rough, and demographic information including gender, nationality, and ethnicity can be recorded.
- The Count Coordinator should provide copies of a data protection statement on the night of the count, in case it is requested 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

The Verifier will seek to raise and resolve any issues with the Coordinator on the night of the count, and return the Count Verification Form to the Coordinator, copying in Homeless Link's Counts & Estimates Project Manager, on the day following the count.

After verification, local authorities should submit the single figure and demographic data using the MHCLG's DELTA online system. See the DELTA guidance for further information:

www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/counts-and-estimates-evaluating-extent-of-rough-sleeping

Data must be submitted to MHCLG by the local authority using the DELTA online system by 14th December.