

Counts & Estimates Toolkit 2018

Estimates 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 an estimate. For information on deciding whether to estimate or count, 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.

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

An estimate is a snapshot assessment, based on evidence from the local authority and a range of external agencies, about the number of people sleeping rough in that local authority area on a particular night. 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.

An estimate can include a spotlight count as one of the evidence collection methods.

Local authorities must involve Homeless Link to validate the estimate and demographic data. The single figure and aggregated demographic data is then submitted by the Local Authority to MHCLG by 14th December using the 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

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.

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.

Early / mid-September

Coordinating the estimate

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 partners in the process.

Organising validation

All estimates are validated by Homeless Link – contact Homeless Link’s Counts & Estimates Project Manager at: verifiers@homelesslink.org.uk at least one month before the planned estimate date to arrange validation.

Homeless Link will attend some estimation meetings and, in other areas, will offer support by telephone and email, followed by telephone validation of demographic data and the single figure following the estimation meeting.

Where an estimate is informed by a spotlight count, Homeless Link will validate the overall estimate meeting rate than the spotlight count, but Coordinators should refer to the Count Process guidance.

DELTA online data collection system

Check that you have signed up to the MHCLG’s DELTA online data collection system. For guidance see: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/counts-and-estimates-evaluating-extent-of-rough-sleeping

Choosing the ‘typical night’

The estimate is based on a single, typical night between 1 October and 30 November. The last possible date is night of 29th into morning of 30th November. The Coordinator chooses the night and agencies collate intelligence in relation to this one night.

Estimates based on two or more nights cannot be validated.

In choosing a typical night for the estimate, 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 take into account 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.
- Make a contingency plan for severe weather conditions that change patterns of rough sleeping (see below)

Sub-regional partnerships of local authorities are in place to enable a coordinated approach across traditional local authority boundaries, ensuring frontline provision prevents single homelessness and rough sleeping nationally. Local authorities within the groupings should work together to coordinate estimates, reducing the risk of people who bed down in different local authority areas being included in more than one estimate, and to ensure that the data collected informs work planning.

Mid / late September

Involve other agencies

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 the 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 been engaged 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 partners for your estimate should include some or all of the following:

- Outreach teams
- Day centres, night shelters, hostels
- Housing department
- Police, community safety teams
- Faith groups, soup runs, street pastors
- Advice agencies
- Housing associations
- Social Services, youth workers, Probation
- Health services, including mental health and substance misuse agencies

Ideally agencies will assign a lead representative who has access to the relevant information and also 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 partners may need to be approached for information. The Coordinator can assess whether it would be useful for them to attend an estimation meeting. These could include National Park Authority Rangers, parish councils, recycling, refuse and street cleaning teams, town centre security, and car parking operatives.

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 they are sofa surfing or squatting, so won't fall into the rough sleeping definition used for the estimate process. Having these conversations at the start of the process should make the estimation meeting more effective. You might find it useful to refer to the estimation meeting agenda and notes in the Estimates Forms & Resources section when you are explaining the process.

Notify agencies of the date chosen for the 'typical night' of the estimate. 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 and a link to the Counts & Estimates Toolkit to all agencies involved so that they understand the definition of rough sleeping and the process for the estimate.

Confirm a date for the estimation meeting, after the 'typical night' chosen. A template invite letter can be found in the Estimates Forms & Resources section.

In areas with low numbers of people sleeping rough or where the local authority covers a large rural area, the local authority may decide to carry out the consultation with local partners via alternative means, such as collecting evidence by email and holding a telephone conference to arrive at the single figure. Homeless Link must still be contacted to arrange validation.

Explain who will be included in the estimate

For the purpose of the estimate, 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.

Agencies should understand that the purpose of the estimate is to assess the numbers of people rough sleeping on the typical night chosen, 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 that 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 validated. These services might need support to assess whether someone is street homeless on the night used for the estimate, 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 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 Task & Targeting or other multi-agency work, this can be used. If no data sharing agreement exists you can use the template in the Estimates Forms & Resources section.

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 with 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 estimation meeting to discuss verbally or email in a password encrypted file. You can either circulate the template estimation form from the Estimates Forms & Resources section or create your own form.

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.

Night of, and morning after, the estimate

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

After the estimate night

The estimation meeting

Holding an estimation 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 more likely to get to the bottom of the issue. Homeless Link verifiers will attend a percentage of estimation meetings as part of the process. The Coordinator or any partners can invite Homeless Link to the meeting. Homeless Link will also look into any concerns raised by partners about how an estimate has been conducted.

If there is already a local forum or network which brings together key agencies working with homeless people, this should be utilised for the Estimation Meeting (with expanded membership, if needed). If the local authority has Task & Targeting or a similar group, the estimation process will be an extension of their ongoing work to identify and assist people sleeping rough.¹

¹Guidance on the Task & Targeting approach can be found at: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/task-and-targeting-toolkit

Please refer to the Estimates Forms & Resources section of the toolkit for a template agenda and notes for the estimation meeting.

If, despite best efforts, an estimation meeting isn't practical, ask agencies to submit their evidence in a password encrypted email file or verbally in a telephone conference. Collate the evidence and resolve any issues by emailing or speaking to agencies.

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 person.

Examples of evidence that an individual slept rough include:

- Individual seen bedded down by 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)
- A spotlight count carried out in particular locations on the chosen night to inform the estimate
- Individual self-reports sleeping rough over the period alongside evidence that they are sleeping rough (appearance – while bearing in mind many people sleeping rough are well-presented, use of services, carrying/storing belongings, 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 estimation meeting in order to resolve any outstanding questions. Partners can raise concerns to Homeless Link if they think decisions have been made that are not in line with this guidance.

Validation

Coordinators should be liaising with their Homeless Link validator throughout the process to ensure their estimate is as reliable as possible. The validator should be invited to estimation meetings – Homeless Link will identify some meetings for verifiers to attend, others will be validated by telephone.

The validator 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
- 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
- There is a single figure estimate to be submitted to MHCLG.

Estimates might not be validated 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 has concluded, the Homeless Link validator will complete the Estimate Validation Form (see Estimates Forms and Resources document) and return it to the local authority lead.

Submitting the single figure

Once the estimate has been validated by Homeless Link, the local authority 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.