



## **Understanding homelessness: how does SJOG support people to overcome/prevent rough sleeping experience?**

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## Introduction

In 2021, two people died homeless every day in the UK<sup>1</sup>. Rough sleeping has increased by more than a quarter in the past year<sup>2</sup>. One in every 58 people in London is homeless, as are 271,000 people in England overall<sup>3</sup>.

Homelessness has received increasing public attention. The government introduced the first Homelessness Reduction Act in 2017<sup>4</sup> and has committed to ending rough sleeping by 2027<sup>5</sup> but with rough sleepers accounting for less than 1% of homelessness<sup>6</sup> the issue is more complicated than it may seem at first glance.

## What is homelessness?

In the broadest sense, homelessness is the condition of lacking stable, safe and functional permanent housing.

When most people hear “homelessness”, they think of rough sleeping; when a person sleeps on the street, outside buildings or in any location not designed for human habitation. But the homelessness charity Crisis includes three less visible forms of homelessness when defining the term: statutory homelessness, temporary accommodation and hidden homelessness<sup>7</sup>.

Statutory homelessness is when someone is legally registered as homeless. Local authorities have a legal duty to secure housing for certain people who are unintentionally homeless and deemed to have a “priority need”. Some people automatically fall into this category: anyone who is at risk of domestic abuse, pregnant or living with dependent children, homeless due to a fire or other accident, and care

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter, 2022

<sup>2</sup> Clarke, Buchanan and Burns, 2023

<sup>3</sup> Shelter, 2023

<sup>4</sup> Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Homeless Link, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Crisis, n.d.

leavers aged 18-20. Others may need to demonstrate that they are vulnerable by showing evidence of a disability, mental health issue, or another specific vulnerability. People who don't have a priority need are still included in statutory homelessness, but they wait longer for housing support from local authorities, who are not legally obliged to house them.

Temporary accommodation, as the name suggests, is designed to temporarily house homeless people while they address other needs they may have, such as health issues or finding work, before moving into permanent accommodation. This includes B&B's and hostels, for example.

Hidden homelessness is when someone does not have permanent housing, but is not included in official homelessness statistics because they are dealing with their situation informally and may not have approached their council for help. Common forms of hidden homelessness include "sofa surfing" with friends and relatives, sleeping in cars, or in garden sheds.

### **How does someone become homeless?**

The reasons behind homelessness are as complex as the forms it can take. A 2022 House of Commons study into trends in statutory homelessness listed unemployed and in-work poverty, the UK's lack of affordable housing, restrictive changes to the benefits system and the ease with which landlords can evict tenants as some of the most prevalent structural causes<sup>8</sup>. Among the most common personal causes were domestic abuse, family and relationship breakdown, and health issues.

Beyond classifying the causes as structural or individual, a useful way to understand homelessness is to always keep in mind the fact that securing and retaining access to safe, long-term housing requires a wide range of things to remain stable in a person's life. Homelessness generally happens when a sudden, unpredictable event sets off a chain reaction that disrupts this access.

Homelessness could happen to anyone; it is not a result of inherent differences between people who experience it and those who do not. If an employed private renter is made redundant and has to move

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<sup>8</sup> Parliament, House of Commons, 2022, pp.13-20

somewhere cheaper before they find work, any trouble getting the documents needed for housing benefit, such as being denied a previous tenancy contract by an uncooperative former landlord, could make them homeless because they would not receive benefits in time to pay their new rent. If someone develops a health issue which stops them working but is not recognised as a priority need by a local authority, the time taken to find new accommodation in a market with as many as 20 interested parties per tenancy could lead them to “sofa surf” or even sleep rough until they can find a new flat<sup>9</sup>. Domestic abuse survivors may be able to move into emergency accommodation quickly, but a shortage of council housing could make for a much longer wait time than temporary accommodation is designed for. The latter issue cost councils an extra £118 million last year, as the number of families living in temporary accommodation as a proportion of the overall population rose by 8%<sup>10</sup>.

### How can it be addressed?

In its recommendations, the House of Commons study mentioned earlier includes building more affordable housing, making it more difficult for landlords to evict tenants, increasing housing benefit, and additional funding for local authorities to prevent homelessness<sup>11</sup>.

Crisis adds to this the abolition of priority need, caps on yearly rent hikes, and, crucially, the widespread use of the Housing First strategy, whereby any homeless person is immediately given permanent accommodation and then supported by outreach workers for any other needs which would otherwise be addressed in temporary accommodation before a move into permanent housing<sup>12</sup>.

Proponents of Housing First draw attention to its success in Finland, where it reduced homelessness from 20,000 people in the mid-1980s to 3,950 in 2021<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Magnus, 2023

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, 2022

<sup>11</sup> Parliament, House of Commons, 2022, pp.51-61

<sup>12</sup> Crisis, 2022

<sup>13</sup> Hancock, 2022

While its critics may point to the expensive upfront cost of building enough permanent housing to implement the strategy, reports from Finland suggest that it saves money in the long term by reducing the need for less economical temporary accommodation.

Research academics Nicholas Pleace and Joanne Bretherton have, however, pointed out that Housing First can only be effective as part of a broader, integrated strategy which includes active homelessness prevention and building more social housing<sup>14</sup>.

Common to all the solutions mentioned above is the core idea that homelessness is inseparable from poor access to affordable long-term accommodation. Efforts to reduce rough sleeping must be accompanied by improvements to this access in order to avoid excessive reliance on temporary accommodation, which drains public money and masks the real problem.

### How is SJOG tackling homelessness?

SJOG provides temporary accommodation and holistic support to people who are rough sleeping, people experiencing homelessness, people at risk of homelessness, families with support needs, people with multiple complex needs, destitute asylum seekers and people with no recourse to public funds. SJOG delivers two main services focused on homelessness: Olallo House in London and The Good Shepherd in Wolverhampton, while its Housing Management Services support people with learning and physical disabilities to live as independently as possible.

**Olallo House** is situated in central London and offers accommodation and specialist client-focused support to street homeless men and women. Clients to the service include migrants, victims of modern-day slavery / trafficking, TB patients and homeless people on discharge from hospital – non-UK and UK nationals, all deemed vulnerable due to a range of factors which may also include substance misuse and poor mental and/or physical health<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Bretherton and Pleace, 2018

<sup>15</sup> <https://sjog-olallo.uk/olallo-house.php>

People who experienced rough sleeping or are at risk of homelessness are referred to the service through different pathways, as per example, the ICS (Integrated Care systems), where organisations come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care service for people discharged from hospitals. The partnerships can involve the NHS, local councils, community and voluntary organisations, local residents, people who use services, their carers and representatives and other community partners<sup>16</sup>.

**The Good Shepherd Services**, a charity based in Wolverhampton which is part of the wider SJOG family, was established by the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd. The charity has supported the local community for almost 50 years. Their service provide food in the city and has expanded to include a day centre, meaningful activity programme, Housing First service and private sector supported lettings scheme. This is all delivered with a psychologically informed environment and trauma informed approach.<sup>17</sup>

In 2022, Good Shepherd took part in our Life Worthwhile research project. The results showed the importance of holistic support for people supported, in order to feel they can regain control over their lives and their bodies - a key issue on addressing some of the personal causes of homelessness. Those involved in sharing their experiences said that the Good Shepherd is paramount in supporting people's mental health.

**Housing Management Services support** people with learning and physical disabilities to live independently. A housing officer is assigned to each person who is their main point of contact to discuss anything relating to their accommodation and will assist with rent payments, housing benefits and reporting maintenance issues. A 'handyman' service ensures repairs are made quickly and regular safety checks are carried out. For some people SJOG will be their landlord. A tenancy agreement, available in easy read, is given to all its tenants. This explains what the responsibilities are of both the tenant and the landlord<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> As per the Health and care Act 2022 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/integratedcare/what-is-integrated-care/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gsmwolverhampton.org.uk/about-us/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://sjog.uk/housing.php>

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