

Felicity Buchan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Homelessness Department
for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

cc. Maria Caulfield MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Health and Minister for Women

cc. Laura Farris MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Victims and Safeguarding

29 May 2024

Dear Felicity Buchan MP,

We write as a coalition of leading homelessness, housing, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and health organisations and local authorities, to ask that the next elected government take urgent action to change the way that women's rough sleeping is recognised and responded to.

A new report, '[The Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023](#)', has shown that current data collection methods under-represent women's rough sleeping to a shocking degree, and that current definitions and strategies to respond to rough sleeping are gender biased and disadvantage women. It is vital that the new Government's response to rough sleeping is equitable and inclusive of women's experiences, if wider ambitions to end rough sleeping for good are to be realised.

Whilst we do not suggest that rough sleeping has been defined, enumerated and responded to in a way which purposefully disadvantages and excludes women, the inequities exposed by this report and in other research are irrefutable, and action must now be taken to address the fact that rough sleeping guidance, policy and practices do not meet the needs of many women.

We have welcomed your support with the women's rough sleeping census work so far, and valued your attendance at the launch of the last census in September 2023. We also welcome DLUHC's ongoing interest in and support of the census, and the recent letter to local authorities advising that flexibility be employed around the verification of those sleeping rough, where people are deemed to be especially vulnerable. Whilst these are positive steps forward, significant and tangible change is needed at a central and local government level across England if women's rough sleeping is to be accurately quantified, and subsequently addressed.

The new report, authored by researchers at Change Grow Live, analyses data gathered from the 2023 women's rough sleeping census that took place in 41 local authorities across England and reached 815 women, using a gender-informed methodology. As with the 2022 London census, the 2023 census revealed that women's experiences of rough sleeping are often hidden, transient and intermittent, and that both the locations and the ways in which women sleep rough frequently fall outside of the current Government definition of rough sleeping. This means that women are highly likely to be missed in the current snapshot counts used to enumerate rough sleeping.

The findings of the 2023 census also suggest that many women across England will not be identified as rough sleeping during normal outreach work, meaning that they are less likely to access current targeted support and accommodation pathways. This leaves women at constant risk of violence and abuse, physical

and mental ill health, and early death – with the average age of death for a woman experiencing rough sleeping being just 43 years old, even lower than their male counterparts (despite women living longer on average in the general population). Rough sleeping is dangerous and devastating for anyone, but women are especially vulnerable, and this report has demonstrated that current systems are further disadvantaging women.

The results are stark, and highlight the urgent need to re-assess the definition of rough sleeping and associated data collection methods and outreach practices to ensure they are equitable and encompass the needs of women. Whilst the Census identified 815 women, the same 41 local authorities identified just 189 women in the 2023 Rough Sleeping Snapshot. The table set out in annex A shows the significant disparities in participating local authorities across England.

We therefore urge the next Government to take action and provide the leadership, guidance and resources to support the following recommendations, based on the report's findings:

- **Make homelessness policies gender-informed:** Current rough sleeping definitions, strategies and practices are based predominantly on the experiences of men. The Government should use the findings from the census to ensure its policy and guidance are gender-informed and provide an equitable response to those who are rough sleeping. In particular, the 2010 definition of rough sleeping and associated guidance should be revised to recognise the increased understanding of women's experiences since it was established.
- **Resource and lead the women's rough sleeping census:** The Government should lead the women's rough sleeping census, supporting every local authority in England to conduct it annually. This can be achieved through the resourcing of a dedicated lead to oversee the rollout of the census, and the support and assistance of the Government's rough sleeping advisors.
- **Conduct an equalities impact assessment:** All government data collected on rough sleeping including the Ending Rough Sleeping Data Framework should be dis-aggregated by gender, and data collection methods should be subject to an equalities impact assessment to ensure that the methods are inclusive of women and marginalised groups.

As the report concludes: *"The aim to end rough sleeping is a vital one that we must reassert, and through a lens of equality: rough sleeping can only end for good if everyone's needs and experiences are considered. Learning from the women's rough sleeping census informs the need for a concerted focus on women, as well as providing understanding and solutions for addressing women's rough sleeping through tailored, safe and effective responses."*

It is also important to highlight that we would urge the next Government not to pursue measures to criminalise rough sleeping as it would be incompatible with a gender-informed approach to ending rough sleeping and would have a significant impact on women. Through our work on the women's census, we have highlighted that women's patterns of rough sleeping make them invisible to systems which require them to be seen rough sleeping in order to get support and accommodation – and they are thereby excluded from that support. To criminalise rough sleeping would make women even more hidden from services and afraid to be seen as rough sleeping due to fear of fines, arrest and a criminal record. This would push women even further away from support, put them at increased risk of violence and abuse, and make it much harder to end rough sleeping.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the findings and recommendations of the census report in more detail, and how we can work together to ensure that the current Government's

target to end rough sleeping is inclusive of the hundreds of women who are rough sleeping across England less visibly, without access to housing and support.

Yours sincerely,

The following organisations have given their signature to this letter:

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| Advance Charity | Orchards UK |
| Agenda Alliance | CLlr Patricia Callaghan, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Deputy Leader, Camden |
| Al Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre | Providence Row |
| ARK | Respect |
| Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid | SafeLives |
| Changing Lives | Single Homeless Project |
| Crisis | Solace |
| Drive Partnership | Spear |
| Freeva | Spring Housing Association |
| Glass Door | St Mungo's |
| Groundswell | Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse |
| IKROW | The Connection at St Martin's |
| It Takes a City (Cambridge) | The Nelson Trust |
| Kairos Women Working Together | Turning Tides |
| London Borough of Islington | Women for Refugee Women |
| London Borough of Merton | Women's Aid Federation England |
| Look Ahead | |
| New Horizons Youth Centre | |

Annex A – Women’s Rough Sleeping Census 2023 data vs 2023 Snapshot

	2023 Government Rough Sleeping Snapshot	Gender-informed women’s census (41 Local Authorities)
London	159	391
Greater Manchester	5	188
Gloucestershire	0	21
Coventry	1	61

National (41 Local Authorities participating in the census)	189	815
England (all Local Authorities)	568	n/a