

# Census guidance for Organisers

Women's Rough Sleeping Census

solace



## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for those organising the census across their county, combined authority, local authority or another defined area. This guidance covers why new areas might want to take part, what to think about in planning the census, and what resources organisers will need to arrange.

This guidance is likely to be less applicable to local authorities within combined authorities: combined authorities usually organise the census centrally, while asking someone in each local authority to take the lead in their locality (e.g. involving local services and planning census week activities). Some of this guidance will apply in this situation, but you may not be responsible for data collection and resources, for example.

Guidance for teams taking part can be found on our website [here](#).

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## BACKGROUND

### Why is there a need for a women's rough sleeping census?

Research, lived experience and the experiences of services tell us that women are some of the most at-risk within the rough sleeping and homeless population, yet we also know that women are under-represented in rough sleeping statistics and provision. Key data sources used to understand rough sleeping come from street count figures based on recording practices which are not adapted to women's patterns of homelessness. It follows that if services are commissioned based on this data, they will not be meeting the needs of those who are not captured in this data.

### What does the census aim to achieve?

The census aims to bring visibility to the experiences of women who are rough sleeping or experiencing hidden homelessness, and may not be represented in data, policy or services.

By using methods which consider gendered experiences, we aim to:

- Collect anonymised data to build a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness;
- Use the findings to advocate for targeted support for women and inform policy and practice;
- Test, support and encourage good practice; and
- Help support services and sectors to forge links and share good practice to result in joined-up support for women.

### Previous census delivery and reports

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census first took place in London in 2022 and has been delivered nationally since 2023 - with 88 local authorities taking part in 2024 and over 100 in 2025. You can find previous census reports on the [census webpage](#).

### Why should your area take part in the census?

#### Accurate and inclusive data collection

Conducting a women's rough sleeping census will provide a more accurate picture of the levels of rough sleeping in your area. Government data reports that women make up only around 15% of those sleeping rough, but an increasing body of research has challenged this figure, highlighting that due to the threat of violence, women often choose hidden and transient forms of rough sleeping, and are less likely to 'bed down' visibly.

This is concerning in two ways; firstly, it means that local authorities and central government are not gathering accurate data on levels of rough sleeping amongst women, meaning women are subsequently overlooked in funding and commissioning decisions.

Secondly, outreach teams are less likely to identify women as rough sleeping and bring them to support and accommodation. Of the 1014 women that participated in the 2024 census, 43% were not in contact with a homelessness service. The women's rough sleeping census enables every local

authority to address this inequity of provision, and respond to rough sleeping in a way that encompasses how women rough sleep.

### **Reaching hidden and marginalised women**

Whilst the census is about better data collection, it is also, most crucially, about reaching some of the most marginalised people in our communities. Rough sleeping is dangerous and traumatic for everyone, but this is especially the case for women; research and lived experience highlight that violence and abuse are near-universal experiences for women who experience homelessness. Women experiencing rough sleeping also die younger than their male counterparts, despite having a longer life expectancy in the general population: the average age of death for a woman experiencing rough sleeping is just 43 years old. It is therefore essential that local authorities are adapting their practices to ensure that women in this situation are reached and supported.

### **A cross-sector, partnership response**

Remaining hidden from support and being exposed to constant violence and abuse results in women being perceived to be more ‘complex’ or ‘high support’ by the time they are found by services, and it also means that women may present in other parts of a local system with their needs unmet – in mental health or physical health crisis, in and out of substance use services, or coming to the attention of the criminal justice system.

Women’s rough sleeping cannot be resolved by homelessness services alone. The census enables cross-sector services to share data to build a more accurate and inclusive picture of local need, and provides a template for each local authority to work more effectively, in partnership, to support and accommodate some of their most vulnerable and marginalised residents.

### **What positive changes have participating local authorities made?**

Local authorities that have undertaken the census have reported a variety of positive changes as a result. As one local authority said:



*Piloting the census gave us the opportunity to gather data that had never been collected before in the county and women were often missed. It provided us with an opportunity to highlight the gaps, barriers and inequity within our support... and tailor our services towards women.*



### **Funding for women specific provision**

Crucially, many areas have finally been able to make the case for women-specific provision using the census data. There are numerous examples of this, including:

- A subregional long-term accommodation service for women experiencing multiple disadvantage approved, funded and started due to data from census.
- A new women’s space co-created with women with lived experience.
- A new women’s shared-house, funded and opened.
- A role funded for a dedicated women’s support worker.

### **Year-round practice change**

Additionally, local authorities have reported multiple examples of how the census has impacted on their year-round practice. These include adopting a broader definition of what rough sleeping looks like for women, and using this for verification purposes; piloting gender-informed changes to outreach practice (such as expanding the locations in which they look for women), adopting regular partnership shifts with women's specialist services - including at times reflective of when women are likely to be visible; and forming a women's rough sleeping action group.

### **Strategies, policies and training**

Areas that have participated have also reported numerous examples of innovative changes to their local strategies, policies, training and services offers. One authority included the census report and findings in their new homelessness strategy, and used it to inform their county training offer. Another used the census findings to develop a policy response with recommendations for change, including service redesign, changes to the outreach team, and partnerships. One area made amendments to KPIs and data collection to ensure they reflect gender, whilst another developed a toolkit for services on gender-informed ways of working.

Local authorities have also reported improved understanding of and attention on the issue of women's rough sleeping and homelessness within services and at senior levels, and have reported that completing the census has supported them to raise important issues. They have also reported improved relationships and partnership working between services and improved relationships with clients.

More examples of changes that participating local authorities have been able to make following the census can be found in the After the Census section of this guidance.

### **What will the census say about my service/area?**

This exercise does not work to highlight any particular service or area, but aims to overcome systemic practices which have meant that women have traditionally been undercounted; share and encourage good practice; and support services and sectors in developing links with each other.

The central census organisers are keen to emphasise that finding high or higher numbers of women in your area than previously found can reflect positively as it indicates that gender-informed working to reach women is having an impact. It is most likely that teams will be identifying women who were already rough sleeping, but have not previously been visible or easily visible to services or in data.

## **METHODOLOGY AND CENSUS OVERVIEW**

The census takes place over a full week (7 days), often at the end of September. For this year's dates, please check [our website here](#)

### **Who is the census for and which services should be involved?**

The census is designed to collect information about women who have experienced rough sleeping or hidden homelessness within the three months prior to the survey. The census definition of rough sleeping (included in this guidance) includes people who might not always be sleeping outside on the street. The census definition of hidden homelessness is also set out in this guidance.

The methodology used differs from central and local Government rough sleeping snapshot counts in recognition of the fact that women sleep rough less visibly and are less likely to come into contact with outreach teams as a result, and might avoid homelessness services which are often accessed primarily by men.

Women might instead reach out to different types of services who can support them with needs other than homelessness, and where they may feel safe or have fewer or different access barriers.

The census is therefore designed for a wide range of services and sectors to take part. Any services who encounter or work with women who experience homelessness can take part in the census, including VAWG, health, drug and alcohol, migrant support services and community-led groups. Involving a wide range of services in the census is important for reaching as many women as possible and building an accurate and comprehensive picture, taking into account women's varied circumstances and the services which support them.

Please note, this census is open to all women and people who feel the gender themes of this survey apply to them.

### **How will it work?**

The census should take place across a whole local authority area, involving as many services as possible and covering outreach hotspots across the whole area. For combined authorities, census organisers suggest the combined authority takes a central overseeing role, with the individual local authorities taking a lead for their own areas. It's possible that not all areas in the combined authority can take part: it is still helpful to conduct the census with those who can.

There are two components to the census - a survey and a meeting.

#### **1. Census survey**

This is a short survey to be completed with women who have experienced rough sleeping according to the census definition, or experiencing hidden homelessness according to the census definition, within the last three months. The census survey should only be completed during the census week.

Answers to the survey can be gathered in three ways:

- Services conduct the survey with women they support or see during census week;
- Outreach teams deliver gender-informed shifts during census week and conduct the survey with women they meet.
- Services hold census sessions to complete the survey with women in day centres or at other key local services or hotspots.

#### **2. Local Insights Meeting**

This is a meeting arranged by local organisers to take place after census week, within the month of October, and involves a wide range of local services. Attending services are asked to submit basic data, such as initials and/or dates of birth, about women they work with who they know have slept

rough at any point within the last three months (July, August and September inclusive). It does not matter whether these women have, or have not, completed the Census survey.

The Local Insights Meeting also involves a review of the census week and a discussion about the local challenges and barriers facing services in supporting women experiencing rough sleeping.

## Definition of women's rough sleeping

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census has found that women's rough sleeping is often:

**Hidden:** Women often avoid bedding down on the streets and will shelter/sleep in places that outreach teams are unlikely or unable to access as part of their routine shifts.

**Transient:** Women often stay on the move i.e. walking all night or moving locations regularly for safety reasons.

**Intermittent:** Women may sleep rough interspersed with other forms of dangerous hidden homelessness, such as needing to provide sex in exchange for a place to stay overnight or staying in flats belonging to unknown or unsafe people. They may make decisions about where to sleep/shelter on a night by night basis based on their assessment of risk and what options are available.

### *Definition of women's rough sleeping*

The purpose of the Women's Rough Sleeping Census is to highlight that women sleep rough differently to men, and that the ways in which they do this might involve them hiding themselves out of sight or taking other actions in order to protect themselves.

Women's rough sleeping means having **nowhere to stay at all**: for example, sleeping outside on the ground or in a tent, sitting/sleeping in places which are open late or 24/7 (such as fast-food restaurants and hospitals), sleeping in non-residential parts of buildings such as bin sheds or stairwells, walking all night, staying on a bus, sex working at night but not having anywhere to sleep during the day, using drugs in other people's accommodation at night but not having anywhere to sleep during the day, etc. This may also include staying in a squat, where this is experienced as being unsafe, transitory and may be in a derelict or unstable environment.

### *Definition of hidden homelessness*

For the purposes of the Women's Rough Sleeping Census, 'hidden homelessness' encompasses other forms of homelessness that involve having no right to or not being able to stay in a safe or fixed place:

- staying in accommodation belonging to unsafe/unknown people/perpetrators
- staying in 'cuckooed' flats
- staying with friends/family/associates on an insecure or transitory basis (e.g. nightly or weekly, or regularly being forced to leave immediately), or living with family or partner in unsafe circumstances i.e. experiencing domestic abuse.

**NB.** The census asks about experiences over the last three months: people do not have to be rough sleeping at the exact time spoken to or met, and do not have to be seen bedded down to be included.

## What support will be provided and how to take part?

The central census team provides guidance and resources for the census. Some of these resources will need to be adapted for your local area in order for you to take part in the census: please see the resources section for more detail (p.12).

The central census team arranges and delivers online training sessions which are recorded and uploaded to the [census webpage](#). The central organising team will also be available for questions, drop-in sessions, and can arrange peer support between participating areas.

Organisers in each local area are responsible for ensuring that all local participants have the resources and information required to take part in the local area.

**Please notify the central census team as soon as possible if your area is hoping to be involved in the census: this will enable them to provide you with updated resources and support, and include your work in the national report.**

Letting the central census team know about your participation is also important for consistency of delivery across all areas in order to gather robust national data and conduct reliable research.

You will also be sent a 'sign up form' at least a month before the census to finalise this involvement.

You can get in touch with the central census team at [womens.census@solacewomensaid.org](mailto:womens.census@solacewomensaid.org).

## What will happen with the information collected?

Data collected through the standard WRSC Census survey should, as standard, be submitted directly to the central census team via the online survey link. Solace, through the WRSC Census project, is the data controller for data collected through the standard survey and is responsible for the secure collection, storage and use of the national survey dataset.

Some participating areas may choose to create and administer their own version of the survey, with agreement from the WRSC team. In these circumstances, the local organisation administering the survey will be the data controller for that survey and will be responsible for complying with all applicable data protection requirements.

Data collected through Local Insights Meetings should be submitted directly to the local organisers for the relevant local or combined authority. Local organisers are the data controllers for Local Insights data and are responsible for its collection, storage and use. Please see the Data Protection section for further information.

Participating areas may request a copy of their own area's survey data to support local analysis, planning and service development. Each area is responsible for any additional research and analysis it undertakes using its local census data. This analysis may be as basic or extensive as local capacity allows – for example, a short summary of census findings for the area or a more detailed analysis and presentation of local trends. Any reports produced should appropriately acknowledge Solace and Single Homeless Project (SHP) as leads of the project and must not include personal information or any information that could identify an individual.

Each year, the central census team undertakes national analysis of the census findings and produces a national report drawing on data from all participating areas. The resulting data and reports help to build a national picture of women's rough sleeping in England and can be used to inform policy, practice and advocacy to improve support for women experiencing rough sleeping.

## Timeframes

The census typically takes place in the last week of September, running from Monday to Sunday (inclusive), whilst the insight meetings should take place the following month. Dates will be announced by the central census team, usually in late spring/early summer. If you are uncertain of this year's dates, please check the census webpage or contact the [women's census inbox](#).

It is important that all participating areas conduct the census during the same week to support consistent data analysis and coordination across all areas. This timing is also chosen to come prior to (and not overlap) with the annual rough sleeping snapshot. The census team recognise that for some areas, the census week may overlap with their bi-monthly counts.

It is recommended that organisers begin promoting and preparing for the census in their area as soon as possible allowing organisers and services enough time to prepare.

Timeline	Actions/Suggested planning
July to September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local organisers to begin promoting and preparing the census from July or earlier</li> <li>• Local organisers to read, prepare and disseminate resources to local teams. This includes guidance, information and training session dates, arranging volunteer or vouchers</li> <li>• Local organisers to officially sign up to the WRSC sign up form</li> <li>• Local organisers to begin planning outreach involvement, planning gender-informed shifts, arranging any women's drop ins, noting hotspots throughout the summer months.</li> </ul>
September / Census week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local organisers ensure dissemination of the WRSC Survey link</li> <li>• Census outreach shifts across the borough/s, using gender-informed guidance. Survey conducted with women seen on shift.</li> <li>• Survey conducted with women attending services during census week.</li> <li>• Targeted census survey or women's sessions: these sessions might be hosted at a day centre with in-reach support from other services, and might be planned as a health or wellbeing day, for example.</li> <li>• Volunteers might be stationed at a local A&amp;E service, homeless health practice, or in a local transport hub.</li> <li>• Local organisers to ensure local insight meeting is arranged and booked for October</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

October / Insight Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning of October is the deadline for area completing their own survey to send in data</li> <li>• Ensure all services attending local insight meetings</li> <li>• Ensure all services and agencies have signed data sharing protocol</li> <li>• Ensure all services have sent in their lists of women ahead of the meeting if necessary, or prepare the list for the meeting</li> <li>• Services attend a post-census week meeting in their borough at which they can submit basic, anonymised data about the number of women they work with who are rough sleeping.</li> </ul>
November to December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deadline for local survey data to be sent back to WRSC team</li> <li>• All data collected and checked by the local census organisers.</li> <li>• Survey data will be returned as requested by WRSC to participating areas. The local organisers should conduct their own analysis of the data (whether basic or extensive), share and use their results locally.</li> </ul>
Spring onwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data to analysed and included in a report covering all participating areas in England, usually released in spring the following year.</li> </ul>

## PLANNING

While there is a central census team who have designed the census and can provide support and guidance and set the dates, each participating area takes responsibility for delivering the census in their local or combined authority.

This guidance sets out advice and tips about planning the census in your area. Some aspects of the census and planning will depend on your area's set up, capacity, environment, and services available. In this guidance, we will note which aspects should be followed as per the guidance and which can be applied more flexibly.

### Setting up the census and initial planning

#### **Who should lead the census and how do we start?**

The census can be led by any organisation or team that works with women experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping: the lead in your area will likely depend on the local set-up, a particular local team's enthusiasm, expertise or capacity, or existence of working groups and networks who wish to deliver the census as a partnership.

The census does not have to be led by the local authority, although securing buy-in and support from the local authority is very valuable.

Examples include the census being led by:

- A local women's service, or a drug and alcohol or health team.
- The rough sleeping outreach team and/or their rough sleeping leads and commissioners.
- A homelessness or women's partnership board/network/forum or similar.
- A combined authority team taking a central role, with each borough or district taking responsibility for their own area.
- A group of representatives from different organisations who work together to lead the census locally.

Whoever leads the census in your area and however this might best work for you, the following tips might be helpful:

- Get together a planning group – however big or small – which can take initial decisions and start planning the census. Discuss which services should or could be represented in that group. You may be able to include women with lived experience in your planning group.
- Try to get buy-in from the local authority, or keep them updated on your plans - this will help them to be aware of the census, perhaps support its delivery, and give the results the most impact. This might be important if the outreach team needs permission to be involved.
- You will need to reach as wide a range of services as possible (which may take some engagement and communications work). Having a few organisations from different sectors on board from the start can help with this.
- Don't be discouraged if not everyone is on board! Part of the purpose in delivering the census is that women's rough sleeping is not always recognised: the census, even on a small scale, can help to demonstrate what's happening for women locally and bring attention to this issue.

If your area would like to take part, whatever stage you're at (whether you want to find out more, or you have a census team ready to go), please get in touch with the central census team at [womens.census@solacewomensaid.org](mailto:womens.census@solacewomensaid.org).

### **Your planning group**

Once you've confirmed your planning group (as above), arrange to meet with them regularly.

Make sure your planning group knows the census dates and has a good idea of what the census is and what's involved. We recommend you share this guidance and previous reports to ensure everyone is clear about who the census is trying to reach (i.e. the gender-informed definition of rough sleeping), and what its aims are. You could deliver this as an initial information session, or use recorded training sessions found on the census webpage. The census team can support you in this too if that is helpful.

We also recommend you develop a rough plan and timeline as a group. There is an example census planning spreadsheet which might help with this – but you will need to edit and amend this for your own area and ensure it contains everything you need locally.

If you are a combined authority, you may need to agree to what extent responsibility will be held centrally, and whether you need planning teams or leads in each district or unitary authority. It is helpful if you make the central census team aware of where the responsibility will lie.

### **Topics for the group to discuss in planning stages**

- **Which services can take part in the census?** List which services and sectors in the local area could be involved and think about how to reach them. Do you need the support of different sector representatives to help engage different teams?
- **How will you let everyone know about the census and what they need to do?** You could hold an open information session, give presentations at networks and forums, go to team meetings, share information by email groups. You can also put up posters.
- **How will you share information and resources in the lead up to the census?** Can you develop a mailing list? Perhaps one of the organisations can host information and resources on a webpage as well, or forward correspondence from the Census team. It would also be worth considering responsibilities of roles to determine who can send this information out.
- **Lived experience** – how will you go about hearing from women and involving them in the planning and delivery of the census?
- **What resources do you need?** (See the section on resources, p.13). Do you have all of these? Do you have or require people who can support you with developing these materials? If not, who can you reach out to/where can you go to get resources or consult people with expertise?
- **Will you want to deliver training or information sessions?** The central census team will provide online recorded training - of which will be available on the [website](#)- but you may want to deliver training that's specific to your area and/or host sessions at which people can ask questions and get support.

## Lived experience

Having the input and involvement of women with lived experience can improve the census in your area and help to reach women effectively and sensitively, as well as contribute to qualitative and narrative evidence building as part of the census results.

The level and type of lived experience involvement you have will vary depending on your area, resources and existing involvement.

### Possible consultation topics for planning stages:

- Which areas would they suggest outreach teams go to on their gender-informed shifts?
- What times should outreach teams go out to have the best chances of meeting women?
- Which services should be involved?
- What tips do they have for outreach teams in sensitively speaking to and approaching women? What doesn't work?
- If they were seen on outreach as part of the census, what would their most immediate needs be and what support would they want to be offered first?
- How else can women with lived experience support and be involved in the census?

### Ways to involve women with lived experience:

- Consultation or workshop sessions, in which women are offered compensation for their time and asked for their input on e.g. the planning topics above.
- Ask women to contribute to the training for teams – e.g. what do they think outreach teams need to know to deliver outreach that works for women?
- Planning census sessions
- Involvement in actual delivery of the census – on shift, volunteers in day centres etc completing the questionnaire, spreading the word, ambassadors, peer researchers.
- If you have any press interest or have a press release, are there any women who would like to be supported to speak to press?
- Interviews to gather case study information and quotes and/or feedback about what would work better for them, for adding to your census report or the national census report.

We recommend that remuneration (e.g. vouchers) is provided for women with lived experience who contribute to planning or information gathering for the census.

## Which services to involve

As we know, for women experiencing homelessness housing isn't usually their only need. Many women are impacted by violence, health needs, substance use needs, benefit needs, immigration support needs and many more. Homelessness services may not be the most obvious route to support for many women because of this, and they may get support from many different organisations without ever reaching a rough sleeping or homelessness team.

Women who use different services may have very different experiences and may not ever be included in homelessness and rough sleeping data – it is vital to include them to get a full picture of women's rough sleeping in your area as well as the range of experiences women can have.

Any services who may encounter women who experience rough sleeping and homelessness should be invited and encouraged to be involved. As rough sleeping is sometimes an off-putting term, it is important to be clear about the range of experiences the census includes so that services feel it is relevant to their service users – even if rough sleeping isn't the primary need that the service supports them with. This is why the survey talks about experiences of having nowhere safe to stay, as opposed to just using the phrase 'rough sleeping'. Some services might only work with a small number of women who meet the description – their involvement is still important as the women they work with might have different experiences from others, or may be distant from homelessness support.

It is important to try to involve as many of the following sectors and services in the census as possible:

- Women's organisations and teams, including local domestic abuse services, sexual violence support services, women's homelessness teams, services supporting women in the sex industry.
- Drug and alcohol support services
- Health teams, including A&E departments, homeless health teams, sexual health teams. Health teams can be very stretched, but many are keen to be involved – especially if they can be supported to do so, e.g. by providing volunteer support during census week.
- Immigration advice and support services/services supporting migrant people
- Community voluntary services – food banks, soup kitchens, many more
- Housing department teams and housing officers, who might encounter women new to homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Homelessness support services and homelessness and rough sleeping outreach teams.

## RESOURCES AND DOCUMENTS

To take part in the census, each area will need to make sure that it can produce and edit the documents required for services and teams to take part, and make sure they can source any resources they may need. Many documents are provided by the central census team, but some will require editing for your local use.

### **Vouchers**

The census organisers recommend providing a minimum of £10 incentive voucher (usually a supermarket voucher) to each woman who completes a census survey. These vouchers can encourage women to take part and recognise their time. Reports from previous participating teams have shown that this has worked well and has been very important for engagement.

If you are a London Borough, the WRSC team may be able to provide vouchers for the census. This is because Solace and Single Homeless Project are both London based charities who may be able to secure funds through donations for this project. You will need to get in touch with the census team to arrange this. For all other participating areas, each area will need to source their own funding for the vouchers and purchase these themselves. All areas will also need to arrange dissemination of vouchers to the services participating in the census.

### ***Hints and tips***

- If organisers would like to provide a higher value voucher or different type of voucher, that is absolutely fine.
- Sometimes organisers can be worried about respondents completing the census survey more than once to get another voucher. As this occurrence is usually very minimal and because there is a question to account for this in the survey, we encourage organisers and teams not to worry about this too much, and focus more on encouraging women to take part.

## **Volunteers**

Organisers may wish to recruit a group of volunteers who can provide support to busy services who want to take part, but have limited staff capacity – in these situations, a volunteer can attend the service and complete surveys with women who are present.

If you are a London Borough, the WRSC census team may be able to support with finding a volunteer for you. You will need to get in touch with the WRSC census team to arrange this.

Volunteers could also support services hosting women’s census or wellbeing sessions during census week. Volunteers could also attend outreach shifts to support outreach team capacity and ensure they have enough women on gender-informed shifts. Where possible, volunteers should be women if they are carrying out the survey one-on-one with women. You may also be able to recruit volunteers who can provide language support. You may wish to source vouchers and/or funds for volunteers, e.g. for travel expenses.

Volunteers should read the guidance and attend the training sessions and should be well supported. For ease and safety, it is recommended that volunteers are recruited who have experience within the sector, unless organisers or services have capacity to safely support and train volunteers. All services should also adhere to their own policies around using volunteers, including supervision of a volunteer in the service, particularly where the organisation has not completed DBS checks for attending volunteers.

### **Hints and tips**

- Organisers will need to consider the best way they can manage a volunteer recruitment process and be confident in the work of volunteers.

Organisers may feel they can only recruit volunteers with experience of working in the homelessness or similar sectors; you may need to ensure that all volunteers are supervised at all times. Organisers may however be able to recruit volunteers without experience if they have existing volunteer recruitment systems or support mechanisms and can provide some training to volunteers who will be conducting the survey or supporting outreach.

- For outreach shifts, all volunteers should be accompanied by an experienced member of staff (as opposed to delivering a shift with another volunteer).

- Consider your own data protection and volunteer processes, and make sure that organisations receiving support from volunteers have also considered theirs. This can help to ensure volunteers are safe and supported, as well as not inadvertently putting any service users at risk, and make sure that responsibilities and expectations of services are well managed.

## **Research**

Organisers will need to consider how much analysis can be done on their local census results and who might be able to do this. This could be at a very basic level, or you may be able to access support to delve into the data further and produce a local census report.

It is worth the planning group considering this at an early stage and what scope there is between the organisations, or with anyone else who may be able to support this.

## **Documents needed**

The central census team will provide the relevant documents for organisers to use: some of these can be used as they are, others will be provided as templates that need to be adapted by each local area. Those that need adapting will be clearly labelled.

## **Guidance and training:**

The central census team will provide guidance for organisers as well as guidance for services and for outreach teams, and some online pre-recorded training.

Local organisers may wish to check if they need to provide any additional or locally specific information for teams in their area. For example:

- When considering outreach locations, it might be that in more rural areas, shops open 24/7 such as McDonalds are less applicable, and therefore not suitable for your geographical outreach locations comparatively to more urban areas.
- Areas may consider providing any relevant information on public events that may affect where people are congregating in public spaces
- Information about language needs that might be likely to be encountered
- Local organisers may also wish to host training which can cover local specifics, answer questions and perhaps provide in-person sessions. Workshop-style training can also allow organisers to get input with planning and e.g. design of outreach shifts and census sessions.

## **Online form**

In previous years, the central census team had provided a template/copy of the up-to-date survey via Microsoft Forms, ahead of the census week for areas outside of London. Each area was required to copy and label this survey for their own census, creating a specific link for their area.

As of 2026, all survey responses will now be collected by a central census survey link, similar to the successful methodology that has been happening in London since 2022. This will streamline data collection, minimise administrative efforts, data-cleaning, and avoid data breaches. This method will also avoid the participating area being responsible for data collection and sending this into the WRSC census team in time to be included

We recognise that areas may choose still to continue duplicate their own survey. If you wish to do this, please make sure you alert the WRSC census team as you will be required to sign different agreements. It is also vital that each area creates its own survey link so that it matches your data

protection statements; so that you are the data controller; and so that you have safe access to the data collected for your area.

If you do not have Microsoft Forms, you can use another platform, but be aware that this will be more complicated and it is easier to create mistakes in the survey or process which then won't match the survey in other areas. If you use another survey platform, make sure to check its data protection measures.

If you need any further support with how to create your own census link, please contact the central census team.

### **Word version**

The central census team will also provide a Microsoft Word version of the up-to-date survey. This can be used where workers and volunteers can't easily access the internet or a device when completing the census survey or find it easier to complete a paper version with service users.

If the word document is used, workers or volunteers must remember to transfer the answers onto the online survey platform before the census week has finished. We recommend you do this as soon as possible after they have completed a paper survey with someone to minimise the risk of the census survey being lost or information from the discussion being forgotten.

### ***Hints and tips – if you are creating your own survey***

- Remember that all existing survey questions should be kept the same in each participating area in order to collect robust data (more information on the section on the census survey, p.17). Variation to these core questions may mean that an area's results cannot be included in the national data and report.
- If an area is adding any questions, they will need to include these at the end of their survey. Please do not amend the order of the existing questions on the survey.
- If an area is adding questions, it is recommended that no more than two questions are added, and that the questions do not ask questions that could be interpreted as overly personal or triggering for women – for example, we do not recommend asking women about violence and abuse, children, substance use for example.
- The existing survey was designed with the input of many women with lived experience of related issues, and is purposefully not too in depth given that the survey will often be conducted by a worker who is previously unknown to the woman, and often not in a confidential space.

## **Privacy notice**

If you are using the centralised survey link, you will sign all necessary data sharing (MOU) agreements when you sign up to the official participation form. These will be linked to the form, where you can share, print and save these documents. We recommend you keep a copy of these for your records.

If you are completing your own survey a template privacy notice/leaflet will be provided by the central census team to be adapted by each local area. This MUST be adapted for each area's own use to ensure that it provides census respondents with the correct information about how their data will be used or who they can contact to discuss it. If you wish, your data protection officer can review the privacy notice for your area or organisation.

## **Local Insights Meeting workbook**

The central census team will provide a Local Insights Meeting workbook which should not need adaptations for your area and can be used as it is. This guidance and guidance for services and outreach includes detailed information about the Local Insights Meeting for those organising or attending it.

## **Data sharing protocol for Local Insights Meeting**

A template data sharing protocol for those attending the meeting will be provided by the central census team to be adapted by each local area. This MUST be adapted for each area's own use to ensure that it provides meeting attendees with the correct information about how the data they submit will be used or who they can contact to discuss it.

If you wish, your data protection officer can review the protocol for your area or organisation.

## **Template services information**

We will also provide a template 'local services information sheet'. We recommend that you complete this template with the information relating to what local services are available in your area. This could include, for example, health services, housing and homelessness support services, mental health support services, drop ins and day services, etc. This can be a useful document for providing women with information they can use at their own pace, even if they don't wish to access support from workers the first time they meet. This can also be a useful document for collating information about local services, which can be helpful for services as well as women. We recommend disseminating this adapted template to census respondents. This is because Census findings consistently demonstrate women do not know where to access support or what services are available.

## **Poster/leaflet**

The central census team has a template poster/leaflet about the census which can help to share information about and promote the census in the lead up to census week. This poster can be adapted for your area, or you can produce your own poster for local use.

## **Translations**

The central census team aim to provide updated translations of the survey each year in a few key languages, including:

- Russian

- Polish
- Romanian
- Tigrinya
- Amharic
- Farsi
- Portuguese
- Spanish
- Tamil
- Urdu

Local organisers may wish to consider any other languages that would be particularly helpful for their locality and see if they can source translations or funding for translations, or contact the central census team in case multiple areas will benefit from having the language.

When translating the survey, it is important to translate the opening explanation to ensure that everyone completing the survey has full understanding of how their responses will be used..

### **Hints and tips**

■ If you decide to host your own survey and ask additional questions in your area, please remember that these won't be included in any centrally provided survey translations.

### **Other helpful information**

- You may wish to consider care packs or essential items for outreach teams to offer to women they meet as part of the gender-informed outreach.
- Perhaps there may be ways for you to access funding for wellbeing and census sessions, which could include offering food, activities, and care packs alongside completing the census.
- Organisers may wish to consider whether they can open any new or additional women's spaces within the area. This might be so that there's a space open all week (even if in different locations), or so that outreach teams can have a safe space in which to speak to women if emergency assessments need to take place, for example. Organisers may wish to consider how they might be able to make any accommodation or bedspaces available or easier to access during census week, so that as much as possible, women completing the census are able to be linked in with appropriate support and/or accommodation.
- Can any additional support be offered on shift or by phone during census week? For example from health practitioners, or drop-in sessions to talk through difficult cases with specialist workers.
- You may wish to request support from a data protection officer or team to look over documentation (see below Data Protection section, p.23).
- You may wish to consider what support is available, particularly for volunteers, after their shifts. Interactions with women may involve mention of traumatic experience and there is the possibility of safeguarding disclosures; it is good practice to have support available for anyone who wishes to debrief after their shifts.

## CENSUS SURVEY AND CENSUS WEEK

The survey is a key element of the census as it provides responses from and supports engagement with women experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping. This provides greater insights into patterns of women's rough sleeping and can help to inform measures to reach and support women. Conducting the survey also helps areas and teams to test gender-informed methods of reaching women and can highlight the range of different services used, informing stronger partnership working. It can also be an opportunity to positively engage women who are new to or have had little engagement with services.

The census survey should only be conducted during census week itself, but can be conducted by any organisation or team that may encounter women experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping. Any teams or staff conducting the survey should have read the guidance and attended/watched the training sessions so that they fully understand how the census works and what's required, and can effectively explain this to any census respondents.

The census survey consists of about 10 questions and is not designed to be intrusive. Most questions provide multiple choice options, but also have an open text box for respondents to answer in their own words.

Any respondents should be supported to complete the survey with a worker or volunteer: this is important so that the purpose and scope of the survey can be fully explained (i.e. what happens to the information the respondents provide, and what the census includes as women's rough sleeping). Respondents may also have a varied understanding of terminology used or describe their own experience in a particular way: workers and volunteers can use their skills and understanding to help explain the questions and select the most appropriate answers for respondents.

### Conducting the survey

The survey should be conducted by a range of services and sectors with the women they encounter during census week. Organisers will be responsible for ensuring the link for the survey is disseminated.

#### **Gender-informed outreach**

Commissioned rough sleeping outreach teams should deliver a minimum of 6 hours of gender-informed outreach over the census week, ideally over different days and at different times, and should conduct the census survey with women they meet. There is no maximum number of gender-informed outreach hours, if teams are able to provide more: larger or busier locations will need more time to cover the whole area, and ideally gender informed outreach should take place every day over census week if possible.

Gender-informed shifts involve selecting times and locations in which teams are more likely to see women in the local area and ensuring there are women on the shift. Further detail on planning gender-informed outreach shifts can be found in the guidance for outreach teams.

Teams can be thinking and preparing over the preceding few months – i.e. noticing where they meet women and identifying times and hotspots in which they're more likely to meet women. Teams should have input into the design of their gender-informed shifts.

Teams should also use the preparation period to ensure they are familiar with gender-informed responses, with services they can refer to and actions they can take if, for example, women they meet disclose violence or abuse.

Teams may wish to arrange joint outreach shifts with other specialist and local teams.

Teams who deliver outreach and are not the commissioned rough sleeping team can also deliver gender-informed shifts, for example drug and alcohol teams. Specialist women's outreach teams very likely already have expertise in reaching women and may not need to adapt their shifts to become gender-informed, but can conduct the survey on their usual shifts.

As noted in the outreach guidance, the survey **should not** be conducted by workers in uniform (such as police and security guards), as women may feel intimidated or fear repercussions – unless those particular workers have existing strong rapport with individuals.

Teams can additionally conduct the survey with any women they meet during routine outreach shifts during census week, in addition to the planned gender informed shifts.

### **Within non-outreach services**

The survey should also be conducted by services who do not deliver outreach. This can apply to a large range of services, including drug and alcohol services, women's services, domestic and sexual abuse services, health teams (including GPs, homelessness discharge teams, A&E, sexual health teams, specialist homeless health services), migrant or immigration support services, housing departments, food banks, soup kitchens, youth services, homelessness advice and support services, day centres.

Accommodation services can also conduct the survey with their residents: women in the accommodation may have arrived at the service within the last three months and have been rough sleeping at some point in that time, or may have been rough sleeping intermittently alongside accessing the accommodation. Providers should note that women they work with may be nervous about disclosing this if they fear eviction processes may be triggered. If appropriate to do so, you may be able to reassure residents that this is not the case, and may be able to use the survey conversation as a way to further understand what is going on for the women living in your accommodation.

Services can conduct the survey with women who attend their service; who they have contact with during that week either in person or by phone; or clients who they specifically contact to complete the survey as they know they have experienced rough sleeping in the last three months.

It is recommended that the survey is conducted by women workers and volunteers as far as possible, but where there is good rapport with staff and volunteers who are men, the survey can be conducted with them, using the service's judgement.

Volunteers can be recruited to support busy services, such as day centres where staff could direct clients to a volunteer within the service to complete the survey. Volunteers should be arranged locally either by the local census organisers or the service itself.

More information can be found in the census guidance for services.

**Please note:** the survey should not be completed without the respondent's involvement, even if the service believes they know the answers they would provide. The purpose of the survey is to complete this directly with service users, talk to them, and be able to include their voices in the results and

report. Where services know of women who meet the criteria, but are unable to contact them during census week, they can be included in the Local Insights Meeting instead.

### **Day centre sessions/wellbeing and census sessions/women's spaces**

Services may wish to host one or more census sessions during the census week. These can be wellbeing days or women's sessions with activities and support for women. These sessions can allow services to conduct the survey with women attending the service; arrange support from volunteers; and encourage women to access support.

Such sessions can also involve and promote partnership working and client access to a range of services (e.g. if representatives are invited to a women's space or session). These sessions could also be a joint effort between a number of services which can reduce workload as well as increase client access to support and to peer support.

## **LOCAL INSIGHTS MEETING**

The Local Insights Meeting is the second element of the census and allows as many women as are known to services to be represented in the census data, including those who may not have been seen during census week. As a reminder these numbers are not combined but reported on separately.

The meeting also supports multiple services to come together to provide their insights and experiences about the challenges they face in effectively supporting women experiencing rough sleeping. This can provide an in-depth localised view of what is and isn't working and what the priorities might be for change. The meetings can also support all of those present to hear a wide range of perspectives and experiences and forge partnerships, as well as debrief about census week.

One local insights meeting should be delivered for each significant area (for example in combined authorities, it is likely most helpful for each local authority or area in the combined authority to deliver a local meeting. In areas with more manageable numbers, however, it may be preferable to conduct a single meeting across a county.) The meetings should be led either by the local census organisers or an appointed lead within the area, such as the rough sleeping lead. It is helpful for this lead to have awareness and relationships with multiple organisations within the local authority.

As with the census survey, the local insights meeting is most effective when it includes as many organisations and sectors as possible. Only 1 or 2 representatives need to attend from each service.

### **Timelines and steps**

The census organisers for the area should read this guidance and ensure the services and outreach guidance are disseminated to all participating teams so that they can prepare for the Local Insights Meeting.

The census organisers should plan a date in October (after the census week) for the Local Insights Meeting and invite relevant services (as many services from the local area as possible). It is recommended that this date is booked during the summer, prior to census week, so that teams have time to prepare and become familiar with the guidance in advance.

Census organisers may also wish to plan one or more pre-census meetings with services and teams who will be participating in the census: this meeting can help organisers to plan census week and be aware of activities taking place in different services; allow services to ask any questions; and run through how the Local Insights Meeting will work so that teams are prepared.

## **Instructions**

**Prior to the meeting**, the lead for the Local Insights Meeting will need to:

- Decide whether they want basic numerical data to be collected in advance, or during the meeting. Areas which anticipate high numbers of women or a large number of services submitting information may wish to do this in advance.
- Invite relevant local services to the meeting and provide them with the guidance.
- Edit the data sharing protocol to include the names of all attending parties. Send the data sharing protocol to all attending parties and ask them to sign and return – everyone signing should know who else will be in the meeting.
- Request attending services to come to the meeting with the information described below, or send in advance. You may wish to send several reminders about this.
- Ensure all data sharing protocol's are signed in advance of any data being shared, especially if this is being collected in advance of the meeting electronically.
- Familiarise yourself with the meeting workbook - you or a colleague can enter data into this during the meeting.

**What attending services will need to prepare in advance the following information. You will either need to ask them to send this to you ahead of the meeting, or bring to the meeting:**

- 1. The number of women their service has worked with in the last three months who meet the census definition of rough sleeping.**

This number should be everyone who meets the criteria and **should not** be based on who did or didn't complete the census survey.

The service's list of women should include date of birth and initials for each woman, if they record this information. Services may wish to note down full names or any services they joint work with so that they can help to confirm duplicate clients across services (names will not be recorded in the meeting).

- 2. The number of women services are aware of/concerned about who they think are rough sleeping (but do not hold or cannot share details for them).**

This could be 'unknown woman in red sleeping bag', or 'there's a woman who comes to our women's space, we think she might be rough sleeping, but hasn't told us her name' or similar.

- 3. Services who are unable or do not feel safe to share initials or any details about individual clients in the meeting can attend the meeting and provide their number without details.**

I.e. 'our service has worked with 6 women in the last three months who have been rough sleeping at some point in that time' (or we believe to have been rough sleeping). These

numbers will be recorded in a separate column as it won't be possible to cross reference and account for duplicate clients.

Services may wish to take notes from their team about the key challenges facing them in supporting women experiencing rough sleeping, and to get summarised feedback on the census from their team to contribute to the discussions in the meeting.

All services should refer to the census guidance for services for full information about preparing for the meeting.

If services cannot attend the meeting, they can submit their numbers to the meeting organiser by email in advance – even if others are not - and the organiser can present their numbers in the meeting. Similarly, services who don't wish to sign the data protocol or submit numerical data can attend the discussion part of the meeting if they wish. They may therefore want to join the meeting at a particular time on the agenda, or when the organiser sends them a notification.

For any services sending their data to the meeting organiser, you can ask them to send this via the word document form template provided by the WRSC census team, via the spreadsheet, or through a method of your choice.

### **During the meeting:**

- When the meeting starts, provide an introduction and background information to the meeting and the census.
- If data is being shared during this meeting, check that everyone has signed, and understands, the data sharing protocol and reiterate the criteria for the data to be submitted (see the guidance or workbook for a reminder).
  - Women's census definition of rough sleeping
  - Rough sleeping within the last 3 months

### **Meeting agenda:**

1. If applicable - collect numerical data from each service and cross-reference for any duplicate clients, using the meeting workbook.
2. If you have collected this in advance – you may choose to cross reference any uncertain cases or share the numerical data.
3. Facilitate a discussion on the challenges that services encounter when supporting women experiencing rough sleeping.
4. Facilitate a discussion to debrief on the census week

### **Facilitating the discussions:**

After you have collected numerical data from each service, you should facilitate a conversation about women's rough sleeping in your local authority. This shouldn't include personal or identifying information about individuals.

This is to further the understanding of the local authority and everyone in the meeting, and support open dialogue about the experiences of women in the local authority. Please note the key themes for your local census report and the national report. You may also wish to ask a colleague to minute the conversation for sharing with the attendees and the local authority: notes and minutes should not include information that can directly identify a client.

Facilitating a short census debrief can also allow local organisers to understand what happened during census week; how teams found it; and any reflections from the teams.

Included in the workbook are suggested prompts for both discussions.

### **After the Local Insights Meeting:**

- Check that the word document or excel spreadsheet has been completed and that you are satisfied with the total number of women identified.
- As soon as you can after the meeting (within two weeks), delete any initials/YOB recorded in the workbook, as per the data sharing protocol. You should not keep a version with the initials, but you will likely want to keep a list of organisations who attended the meeting. Check that your workbook contains no personal or identifying information and ensure that any information shared with you via email has been deleted.
- When you are happy that no identifying information is stored within the workbook and that you have included your primary themes and barriers, use the instructions from the central census team to send this data securely for inclusion in the national census report. This data can also be included in your local census analysis and findings.

### ***Hints and tips***

■ When analysing your data from the meeting and census survey, you should have **four** figures: a number of census survey responses; a number of known women recorded in the Local Insights Meeting (who have all been cross-referenced for duplicates); and a number of 'unknown' women recorded in the meeting who could not be checked for duplicate clients, and the number of services that attended the meeting or sent in their information.

These numbers should not be added together and should remain as separate figures: this is because the individual they include could be recorded in more than one of the three figures.

## **DATA PROTECTION**

### **Survey data**

Solace is the data controller for the standard WRSC Census survey. Solace has determined the purpose of the survey, the information to be collected, and the arrangements for the collection, storage and use of the survey data.

Participating local authorities and partner organisations support the collection of survey responses by engaging with women experiencing rough sleeping and entering responses into the survey. However, Solace remains the data controller for the standard survey and is responsible for the management of the national survey dataset.

All survey responses submitted through the standard WRSC Census survey will be received and securely stored by Solace. Solace will use the data for census analysis, reporting and other purposes set out in the census documentation and privacy information.

Participating areas may receive data relating to their own area for local analysis and planning purposes. Any sharing of data will be carried out securely and in accordance with agreed data sharing arrangements.

Areas choosing to create and administer their own local survey, rather than using the standard WRSC Census survey, will be the data controllers for that survey and for any data collected through it. In these circumstances, data should be submitted directly to the local organisers and managed in accordance with local data protection requirements.

### **Local Insights data**

Local census organisers are the data controllers for data collected through Local Insights Meetings and any other locally organised insight-gathering activities. Where multiple organisations are involved in organising Local Insights Meetings, they should agree which organisation will act as the data controller and be responsible for collecting, storing and managing the resulting data.

All Local Insights data should be submitted directly to the relevant local organiser(s). The central census team should only receive Local Insights data where this has been shared by the local data controller in accordance with agreed arrangements.

As data controllers, local organisers are responsible for ensuring that all personal data is collected, stored, used and shared in compliance with UK GDPR and data protection legislation.

### **Ethics**

The central organisers have carefully considered ethics and data protection with researchers and data protection teams who have been satisfied that the data collection for this project is proportionate; there is low risk of negative impact to individuals; and mitigations can be put in place to minimise risk.

Because the census predominantly collects anonymous information, the risks are likely lower than for other forms of data collection carried out by services and local authorities.

Your organisation or local authority may have a research and ethics team that may require you to submit documentation for approval, or may require a data protection impact assessment (as below) to help understand the risks involved.

### **Data Protection Impact Assessment**

It is recommended that each area complete some form of data protection assessment or legitimate interest documentation (templates can be found on the ICO website). This may be completed by the local organisers or a data protection officer/team from their service or local authority. This can help organisers to identify and minimise any data protection risks. It may be helpful to have a Data Protection Officer (DPO) involved in creating or reviewing documentation.

### **Collecting data**

Local organisers are responsible for collecting the data from the survey and collecting and storing Local Insights Meeting.

#### *Survey*

For the majority of participating areas – the survey link will be sent from the central census team, and as such they are data controllers. If you are choosing to duplicate your own survey, then you will be data controllers. In this instance, a specific survey link should be created by one of the local organisers: all survey responses for the area should be submitted via that link. See more detail in resources and census survey sections. Organisers should confirm the WRSC team are aware they are doing their own form, as well as any security and GDPR compliance of the survey platform chosen as well as checking who will have access to the results. The central census organisers **strongly** recommend using the standardised link where possible.

#### *Local insight meetings*

Resulting data from your area's Local Insights Meeting/s should be sent securely by meeting organisers to one named local organiser's email address (or may already be held by the organiser if they led the meeting). All data collected should be stored securely, including using appropriate secure email transfer when necessary.

#### **Using and sharing the data**

The local data controller (one of the local organisers) will need to ensure that data is collected and stored securely. Data should be checked following the census to ensure it does not inadvertently hold any potentially identifying information which is not required for the census e.g. written in the survey's open text boxes.

Local Insights Meeting organisers should ensure that any initials/YOB recorded are deleted from their Local Insights Meeting workbook at the end of the meeting or at the earliest opportunity (see Local Insights Meeting section).

As previously noted, census organisers encourage all local areas to conduct their own analysis of their census data for their own use – whether basic or extensive.

In most years, the central census team will collect all national data from local organisers for use in a national census report. Any data shared with the central census team should be entirely anonymised. It should be shared securely, following the protocol outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding agreed and signed between the local and central organisers confirming how the data will be sent, secured and used.

#### **Data protection documents**

Documents relating to data protection that will require editing, creating or signing are listed below, with further detail in the resources section.

- DPIA/legitimate interest assessment – local organisers may need to complete documentation for their organisation's own requirements. This is not provided centrally, so you may work with your data protection officer on this.
- Privacy notice – a template is available. This **must** be edited to include the details of the local organisers (data controller/s) and local census.
  - A DPO may view that a full privacy notice isn't required, but all local organisers should provide written information about the census to anyone taking part so that they know how their information is being used and can give informed consent to take part.

- Local Insights Meeting protocol – a template is available. This **must** be edited to include the details of attending organisations, meeting organiser and data controller/s.
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or similar – this is used for anyone sharing data with the central census team for use in the national report. A document will be provided by the central team for participating areas to agree and sign.

## WHO MIGHT BE MISSING FROM YOUR DATA?

The census has been developed because women are underrepresented in rough sleeping statistics and provision, in part because methods of reaching people who are rough sleeping don't work as well for women, and because women can be at high risk when visibly rough sleeping.

These difficulties can be compounded further by intersectional experiences. For example, trans women are likely to be at an even higher risk of violence and therefore even less visible to services; migrant women may face barriers in approaching services due to language barriers and fear of immigration enforcement; young women may feel unable to access services, or reach homelessness in a different way; racially minoritised women may face racism that deters them from support.

Some women are at even higher risk and face more barriers to accessing services. While the census can change practices to reach more women, there can be a danger of still missing many women – while the census cannot and is not expected to count every woman, it is very important that the census in each area can reach a cross-section of groups, including migrant women, LGBTQ+ women, younger women, women from the global majority.

The census needs to include people with a wide range of different experiences of women's rough sleeping so that its results can inform and design support that works for all women. It is also vital that all women feel that they can take part in and be represented by this work.

For those who have delivered the census before, it is worth considering how to reach any groups who may be underrepresented in your data.

One factor in reaching more women is making sure there are safe and private spaces that feel safe for women when sharing their information for the census or for assessments. As census organisers, you may wish to make such spaces available for census week.

### **Migrant women**

Migrant women may be excluded from taking part by language barriers and nervousness about who will see their information (and if it will impact their immigration status). 'By-and-for' services (services that are led, designed, and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve) supporting migrant women may be more concerned around data sharing of these vulnerable groups. By-and-for organisations may also lack time and staff capacity to be as fully involved as they might like, due to stretch and lack of funding for these services.

Things to consider:

- In what languages can you provide the survey and accompanying materials? Each year, the census team will aim to provide the survey in a few key languages. You may want to consider procuring additional translations for languages that are prevalent in your area.

- Can you ask for volunteers with language skills? Can people with language and translation skills be on call to support?
- Can you ask your local specialist services what support they might need to get involved, or what involvement they can have?
- Can you support service/s to host a census session, at which you could provide volunteer support? Can you offer volunteers to their service if the service is happy with this?
- If any by and for services can't take part in census week or the Local Insights Meeting, can they provide summary data about the number of women they support who are rough sleeping, or help to gather case studies from their clients? Can their clients be involved in input sessions?
- Some specialist teams may also consider delivering joint census outreach shifts with the outreach team, or may already deliver their own outreach shifts.

### **Younger and older women**

Younger women's typical patterns of rough sleeping may vary from those of even just slightly older women, due to the way they may reach homelessness and the resources they have available (or lack of). Homelessness and VAWG services (such as refuges) can sometimes feel off-putting to younger women, who may seek support elsewhere.

Likewise, older women may have a different pattern of using services and accessing them. They may also face technological barriers.

Things to consider:

- Are there any youth services in your area that could be involved in the census? Are there any services or voluntary organisations supporting older people?
- Can you make sure the housing department is involved, in case they see a different age range of women?
- Can you let social services know about the census so that they can spread the word or be involved?

### **LGBTQ+**

Trans women can face very high levels of violence and LGBTQ+ people can be disproportionately affected by homelessness. However, services may not feel openly accessible or safe for LGBTQ+ women who may avoid or access specialist by and for services instead.

Some trans women, non-binary people or trans men who have faced gendered experiences of homelessness (including by being labelled or seen by others as women) may also be unsure if they can take part in the census – they certainly can and it is important to include their perspectives.

**Things to consider:**

- What by and for services supporting LGBTQ+ people are there in your area? Can you get them involved in the census?
- Can you ensure that staff and volunteers have guidance on sensitively asking questions about gender and approaching women and non-binary people who may want to take part in the census? Teams can be encouraged or supported to fully explain who the census is for, and encourage people to take part.

- Do any local services have LGBTQ+ sessions at which people can find out about and may feel more comfortable completing the census survey?

### **Global majority ethnic groups**

Black ethnic groups are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and rough sleeping, as are other racially minoritised groups. Due to experiences of racism, sexism and lack of cultural understanding, however, minoritised women may not access homelessness services as often. Women from different cultural backgrounds may also feel uncomfortable accessing services or talking about their experiences, for example if homelessness or abuse are particularly stigmatising.

#### **Things to consider:**

- Contact local by and for services which could be involved in the census.
- Can you ask local services what support they might need to get involved, or what involvement they can have?
- Can the service support their clients to be involved in lived experience input sessions?

### **Disability**

Disabled women may face numerous practical barriers to accessing services and support, and may be at higher risk of particular types of rough sleeping and other risks if they need to be more reliant on other people.

#### **Things to consider:**

- Are there any by and for services locally which could be involved in the census?
- Ways to support women with e.g. visual impairment, hearing loss or deafness to take part in the census survey (e.g. dedicated volunteers)
- Can you make sure the housing department is involved?
- Can you let social services know about the census so that they can spread the word or be involved?

NB. Although disabled women and people under 18 should not experience rough sleeping as they are usually entitled to housing support from the local authority, we know that women can still experience homelessness and rough sleeping.

## **RURAL AREAS – adaptations for environment**

Many of the difficulties of reaching and counting women are similar to the difficulties of reaching and counting people who are rough sleeping in more rural areas – the [Rural Homelessness Counts Coalition](#) are looking closely at this issue. This can mean that women can be even less visible to services in rural areas who may need to consider some adaptations to ensure the census can work best for their environment.

These challenges can include:

- Outreach across a large area or across different and more difficult environments, such as woodland or forest.
- More limited outreach resources relative to the size of the area, including outreach which can only cover hotspots.
- A concentration of services in one or two urban or more central areas.

### **Flexibility for rural areas:**

Although it's important to deliver the census consistently, it is vital that rural areas can adapt the census to best fit their environment and resources. Adapting to your area is important for achieving impactful census results, but also for identifying potential long-term changes which could support you and your teams in reaching women.

Each rural area can be unique and therefore it is unlikely that prescriptive suggestions would work for all areas. It's therefore important that those who know their area best consider the environment and their usual approaches from a gender-informed perspective and think about how you can most effectively reach women across the area, utilising the resources and agencies that exist.

This is most likely to impact a rural area's outreach delivery for the census. The central census organisers suggest that rural areas consider the gender-informed principles of the outreach guidance and try to apply these to your practices, rather than being prescriptive about times and locations suggested that may work better for more urban areas.

Rural and mixed environment areas who have taken part in the census suggested adaptations to try: these are detailed below.

### **What approaches could rural or mixed environments consider for delivering an effective census?**

#### **Involving a wide range of agencies:**

- Think very broadly about the agencies that you can approach to be involved in the census. These might be services that are usually less involved in rough sleeping work.
- Partnerships or working with different agencies can help to bolster the outreach offer during census week: perhaps staff from other teams can attend shifts.
  - This might be especially helpful where outreach teams are staffed predominantly by men and/or where there is a small team to cover a large area.
- If an area has a concentration of services in one town or locality, reaching the smaller and more rural localities will likely require focused approaches: involving agencies and services in those areas can be very effective.
  - Can you also be creative in where you could meet women to do surveys in those areas? Could you host a wellbeing day in a community space, or complete surveys at a GP or health service? In some areas, working with the diocese has been found to be a good way to reach more people.
- You could consider covering one district/location per day during census week. In that area, you could deliver outreach, host survey sessions in local services, advertise census sessions, engage with the community.

- Participating areas have found that working with a range of agencies for the census has built and strengthened long-term relationships beyond the census.

#### **Intelligence gathering and engagement:**

- Rural areas may be more reliant on local intelligence: planning time can be used to hear from services and communities and directly from women. During census week, it might be most helpful to make use of existing keyworker relationships to complete surveys.
- Communities can hold lots of information, but may not know how to offer support to women who are rough sleeping. Perhaps areas can conduct promotional work to communities (posters, flyers, meetings) to help to emphasise women's different experiences of rough sleeping and which services are still applicable to them, and how communities can contact or signpost women to relevant services. They may be able to provide information prior to or during census week.

#### **Outreach:**

- Rather than conducting prospective outreach (i.e. conducting shifts across an area to look for people not yet known to the team), some areas might find it more helpful to focus their energies on intelligence gathering from different services and ensuring that there are hubs or centres in each area/district/town which are well equipped and prepared to conduct the survey throughout census week. The outreach team may wish to provide a presence in these locations during census week. You may also want to consider visiting more general public spaces, such as community centres, libraries and places of worship.
- Your outreach teams may usually cover one district per day – you could continue this approach for census week, but focus on gender-informed techniques or gather intelligence about women in those areas beforehand.
- Work with outreach teams who may cover different areas, or who may already deliver a different type of or gender-informed outreach. Ensure that their teams are familiar with the census and know that it includes their clients. You may want to deliver joint shifts, or you may agree different areas to cover across census week.

#### **Flexibility and taking opportunities, thinking differently:**

- The census is an opportunity for every area to consider ways in which it might be more difficult for women to access and reach support. There might be things that you notice which are very difficult to rectify for census week – but you might notice some smaller actions you can take or something you can try for census week, even if it doesn't work perfectly. Recognising this and starting to think about different approaches is very beneficial.
- Some areas have found that flexibility and responsiveness has been key for a gender-informed approach in their area, as well as being able to take opportunities when they come. For example, adapting a planned shift to be able to respond to a referral for a woman seen rough sleeping. This might be important to respond to quickly if she might move on imminently and be lost to services, or if she might be at high risk.

- You may wish to emphasise the option of completing the census survey on paper (to be submitted online later). This could make completion of the survey more practical in some situations, and can allow for being in locations with little or no signal.
- The census organisers and rural areas which have participated in the census encourage all areas to do as much of the census as you can – i.e. conduct the survey and deliver the Local Insights Meeting. Even receiving a few completed surveys can begin to provide important and helpful insights into women’s experiences in your area, and the meetings can achieve more comprehensive county or area-wide understanding.
- Start preparing for the Local Insights Meeting early – this might be a particularly effective way of representing women across the whole area, as long as services are thinking in advance about who they’ve met who fits the criteria.

## **ADDITIONAL DATA YOU MAY WISH TO RECORD**

When services meet women who wish to complete the survey, it is important that any additional support, referrals or signposting are offered - as a service would with any potential client. The template services information document can help, particularly where women don't feel able to accept offers of support at the first meeting. The census can be a valuable opportunity to meet and engage women who may not yet have accessed any support or received information about support options.

### **How will you use their information?**

It is important, however, that workers and volunteers are clear about how any information they collect will be used. Before completing the survey, workers must clearly explain how the respondent's information will be collected and used. Workers should make clear that any additional information collected or asked for (e.g. to clarify support needs or open a case) is being collected separately and refer to their service's privacy notices as they usually would. If they have a broader conversation that won't be recorded in case notes or in the survey, they may wish to explain that the conversation is confidential and won't be shared.

While collecting survey responses is important for the census, the safety and consent of the respondent is paramount: if a woman requires urgent and/or complex support, this should come first.

### **Collecting extra information – considering issues of ethics and consent**

Some local authorities or teams may want to record details about women who are met through the census in order to provide follow up support. As above, this should only be done with explicit consent and by explaining that this information will not be collected for the census, and explaining who is collecting it and why it should be used. Teams should follow their usual data protection procedures.

Some services may also want to record the number of women met who decline to complete the survey. The census organisers recommend that this information isn't collected as it undermines the decision that the respondent has taken to decline participation; it is not required for the census activities; and it won't usually be possible to confirm that someone has been rough sleeping within the past three months without completing the survey, so the data gathered will have limited use.

Teams may instead wish to reflect on roughly how often women declined to participate and this can be discussed at the Local Insights Meeting: if this is a common finding, or particular to a few teams, it could support improvement of census and gender-informed techniques in reaching and speaking to women, or highlight that a number of people did not want to complete the survey.

### **Gathering additional information**

Collecting additional data is entirely optional for the census.

#### **Quantitative**

Local census organisers may wish to collect additional information to help form a local picture of women's rough sleeping. For example, the number of women leaving prison into rough sleeping; the number of women leaving hospital into rough sleeping; the number of women leaving homelessness accommodation without anywhere to go. If the relevant services agree, information could be requested from them at the end of the three-month census period (July to September). This could also

apply to organisations who span multiple areas and may be unable to identify which clients come from which specific local authority.

Organisers may find that some services wish to contribute to the census, but have limited capacity to do so. Discussions should be held with the service about how organisers may be able to support them to be involved, or consider different ways of contributing.

This could be through providing a breakdown (without identifying information) of the number of women they work with who are rough sleeping, preferably within the three-month period the census covers (July to September). This information can still be helpful at a local level and allows the service and its clients to be represented in some way.

It's possible that this information may not be included in the national report, but can be collected for local organisers' own understanding and local needs.

### **Qualitative and narrative**

Qualitative and narrative information can also be highly valuable for the local area's own understanding and advocacy and for the national census report. This can provide additional information and context which cannot be collected through the census survey or Local Insights Meeting discussions, and which can be very insightful.

#### **Methods of collecting this information could include:**

- Workshops with women with lived experience conducted as part of the census planning process.
- Interviews with women with lived experience, either asking general questions about their experiences, or selecting specific questions that the organising team wish to explore.
  - (For example, experiences of accessing support; how many times and for how long women have been experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping; reasons that led to homelessness and rough sleeping; experiences of accommodation and why women may have refused or left accommodation options).
- Case studies created with individuals or requested from services. These could explain a person's story – how they arrived at homelessness, what their experience of homelessness and rough sleeping involved, how it impacted them, how they found accessing services and getting support.
  - Case studies like this can be very helpful for providing contextual information that can't be gathered through the census survey, and can be powerful illustrations of how rough sleeping impacts women and why focus on this issue is important. Case studies can be included in local and national census reports.
- With the appropriate permissions and data protection measures in place, case data from one or more services can be used to construct more in-depth timelines. For example, exploring the dates which women became homeless for the first time; when they accessed services; when (if) they were able to access accommodation; and repeated experiences of homelessness, as well as other potentially helpful information. These can be anonymised as necessary.
  - Studies such as this can again provide more in-depth information which can further understanding about women's patterns of homelessness and rough sleeping and access to support.

- Interviews could be conducted with staff members at services to get more in-depth understanding about their experiences and concerns in supporting women in the local area, perhaps building on the Local Insights Meeting discussion, or reflecting on their experience of conducting the census.

If additional research methods such as those above are used, we encourage you to ensure you follow best practice around research integrity and ethical practice. This includes giving informed consent, being clear about why the research is being carried out and how it will be used, anonymisation where appropriate, and ensuring that approaches to collecting personal stories are informed by trauma-informed principles. We also recommend that compensation (e.g. vouchers) is provided for women with lived experience who contribute to any of these forms of qualitative data collection.

## AFTER THE CENSUS

### Using and sharing the data

As outlined earlier in this guidance, it is recommended that each area delivering the census completes analysis or a report on their census data (to any level) for their own use. This is particularly important because the national report will not go into detail about local area's findings and the national report won't be available until the spring following the census.

Local data and findings, even if relatively simple, should be used to:

- Share with services and teams who participated
- Share with forums and networks
- Share with the local authority, including different sector teams and senior officials
- Where possible, feed back to women in services who may have taken part in the census

You could:

- Host an event for local and regional stakeholders to attend to explain the results of your census and the next steps you intend to take.
- Share the findings publicly, perhaps on social media, in blogs, on your website, in press releases to showcase the work you are doing and bring attention to this issue.

### Next steps

Next steps will likely be very different for each area and may depend on the level of involvement of different stakeholders, capacity, opportunities, starting point and gaps identified.

Regardless, it is recommended that each area identify a few short and/or long-term next steps that the census results can inform.

Areas which have conducted the census have reported a wide range of resulting activities: these are included in the list below as ideas to help each area to consider which next steps they can take.

### **Conducting the census annually**

We recommend that areas repeat the census annually. This has been shown to build on results and techniques, and increase service involvement and familiarity with the processes, resulting in improved and comparable year on year data.

### **Ideas for next steps**

#### **Practice**

- Training offers for services, including on VAWG; women's homelessness and rough sleeping; trauma-informed working with a gendered lens; gender-informed outreach practices; gender-informed working within accommodation services.
- Adopt the gender-informed definition of rough sleeping within or across services, to help inform the clients that services work with and referral criteria and processes.
- Adopt gender-informed outreach practices or shifts: as per the census guidance, this might include identifying new locations; developing new partnerships and relationships with staff in relevant services (including train stations and A&E); outreach times and approaches; conducting partnership shifts with specialist services to reach women.
- Amend verification practices for identifying women who are rough sleeping: this might include no longer needing to verify someone and using other information to determine rough sleeping (such as self-reporting or information from another service); and/or using a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping to help identify those who are rough sleeping.
- Develop and/or share resources, for example some areas have developed a gender-informed toolkit for outreach workers; general toolkits on gender-informed working; resources about services which can better explain their offer for women and encourage access for women.
- Start a women's rough sleeping forum or network at which services can discuss cases, gain and share up to date knowledge, and share barriers and risks for women locally.
- Support partnerships and sharing of information between services, particularly ensuring teams are aware of specialist services and women's spaces and drop-ins.
- Increase focus on reaching or supporting a particular group if they are under- or overrepresented in the census data, for example older women, or migrant women. (Data might show that particular groups are being seen more than expected and therefore need additional support, or may show that groups are rarely seen when they would be expected and therefore may be being excluded from services).

#### **Services**

- Review accommodation and service referral processes/criteria to ensure they are accessible to women and are gender informed.
- Increase focus on/identify problems and steps to take to improve safety for women in all services, including women's services which may be targeted by men or partners.
  - Consultation with service users can support with this, and services and commissioners may as a start wish to ensure that there are policies and practices in place for responding to VAWG; clear mechanisms for reporting incidents; women's spaces or days within a service; that all communal areas are monitored; that staff are aware if services, floors or room clusters are vulnerable to targeting.
- Use the census findings and results to inform planning and applications for new support and accommodation services, and to evidence level of need. For example, areas have used their data to apply for funding for and start the following types of services:

- Women’s subregional accommodation for women with multiple disadvantage
  - Women’s shared houses and other accommodation
  - Additional local winter funds used to provide women’s evening winter service
  - Co-created women’s spaces and women’s evening drop-ins with funding for therapeutic interventions. Some of these spaces have been developed with women who took part in the census.
- Use the census findings and results to evidence the need for and create/apply for funding for women’s specific roles within teams, such as women’s navigators and support workers.
  - Expand the cohort which can be worked with by a service or navigator, ensuring more women are represented on a caseload, and using the census results to evidence level of need.
  - Review current provision and capacity of services and accommodation for women, and review whether current provision is meeting level and type of need for women.
  - Review and amend service specifications (e.g. outreach) to ensure they are gender-informed and inclusive of women’s homelessness, going into detail about how the service will support women.
  - Review and amend KPIs and data collection or monitoring to ensure they reflect and disaggregate by gender.
  - Deliver focus groups with women who are experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness to understand more about what’s missing from the current local service offer.
  - Conduct a deep dive into individual cases to better understand the experiences of women in the local area and in services.

### **Policies**

- Create a set of recommendations and/or a policy response to the census, using the findings to suggest changes which should be made as a result.
- Include the census findings in new or renewed local homelessness/rough sleeping strategies.
- Set out and embed gender-informed changes into commissioning practices, based on findings and recommendations from your census results and available advice and resources.
- Use the census findings and support in your area to advocate for gender-informed homelessness responses to be put on the agenda at strategic and operation levels and at partnership boards and networks.

## **HINTS AND TIPS from previous census organisers**

- Start as early as possible – the earlier you’re able to start talking to people about and organising the census, the easier this will be.
- Engaging services, particularly those outside the homelessness sector, can take time. Plan enough time for this and ask for help from other services and sectors: services may not immediately see the relevance of this work to them or understand how they can be involved.
- Some services may have capacity issues, particularly by and for services and health services. If they can’t be involved in census week, can they be involved in another way? Could volunteers come to their service? Could they come to the Local Insights Meeting? Could they provide case studies or lived experience involvement?

- Be aware that some services may drop out in census week, sometimes due to staffing or capacity issues. This may require you to rearrange shifts or you might unexpectedly be unable to deliver a shift or reach a particular service. Do what you can, and just note it in your methodology form!
- Many teams can worry a lot about duplication: the advice from the central team and from researchers is not to worry too much! The census will never count every single woman who is rough sleeping in an area and therefore will never claim that the census numbers are exact figures. There are mitigation factors in place to log or account for duplication, and this is carefully considered in the Local Insights Meetings. It is much more important to reach as many women as possible instead: it is much more likely that we'll miss women than count women twice.
- What support can you offer or arrange for women or for staff during census week? Can you help to link up different services, let people know what referral pathways are available this week, can services contact other services for follow up support for women they meet? Census week can be a good opportunity to try something new with little time commitment.

## FAQs

### What about duplication?

Duplication is something that many teams can worry about! The organisers and researchers stress that this needn't be a primary concern: the questionnaire encourages respondents to say if they've already conducted the survey, and sometimes the answers can reveal inadvertent replicas. It is more likely that areas will miss women who are rough sleeping than count so many women twice that it severely impacts their data. Our researchers have considered this thoroughly and the benefit of trying to reach women and hear about their experiences far outweighs the risk of duplication. We are not trying to, and we never claim to, produce an accurate statistical picture of the number of women rough sleeping - instead, our focus is to build a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping.

The Local Insights Meeting is also specifically designed to produce a more precise number of women in the area and accounts for duplicates.

### Do women have to have been seen rough sleeping in order to be included in the survey or Local Insights Meeting?

No. The census involves speaking to women who have experienced rough sleeping according to the census gender-informed definition in the last three months.

To be included in the census, women **do not** have to have been rough sleeping in the week of the census itself and don't have to have been seen rough sleeping: services can rely on self-reporting. This timeframe will also usually coincide with a reporting quarter (July to September) for many services.

### Who should we count in the Local Insights Meeting?

The Local Insights Meetings should count any women seen by or known to services and have been rough sleeping in the last three months (July to September). By rough sleeping, we mean the gender-informed definition found in this guidance.

As many services as possible should attend the Local Insights Meeting: organisers may wish to emphasise that this is a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping and who that includes, so that services recognise that this includes their client group.

It doesn't matter if the women in question have completed a census survey or not – the survey and meeting figures won't be combined.

Ideally, services will provide information that allows the organiser to account for duplicate clients. However, if a service cannot provide detail, their numbers can still be represented in the data.

### **How do we get vouchers for our census?**

Each county, combined authority or defined area taking part is responsible for sourcing vouchers for their area for the census. Local authorities within a combined authority which is conducting the census (e.g. London or Greater Manchester) should speak to their local census organisers for information about vouchers.

### **What if my Local Insights Meeting workbook is showing an error message?**

As the spreadsheet uses formulas, if you get any error messages, reopen the spreadsheet from the original link/attachment.

### **How do we take part?**

If your area would like to take part, whatever stage you're at (whether you want to find out more, or you have a census team ready to go), please get in touch with the central census team at [womens.census@solacewomensaid.org](mailto:womens.census@solacewomensaid.org).

## **Contact details**

### **Resources and information**

Please check the census webpage for previous census reports, and the most up to date resources and guidance.

[www.solacewomensaid.org/womens-rough-sleeping-census](http://www.solacewomensaid.org/womens-rough-sleeping-census)

### **Get in touch**

If you are interested in finding out more, please get in touch with the central census team via the address below. They can answer questions, provide updated resources and support, and include your work in the national report.

[womens.census@solacewomensaid.org](mailto:womens.census@solacewomensaid.org)