

Guidance for outreach teams

Women's Rough Sleeping Census

solace



GUIDANCE FOR OUTREACH

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for teams taking part in the Women’s Rough Sleeping Census in their area. This guidance is specifically for teams which deliver any sort of prospective outreach (i.e. conduct outreach shifts to work with people they know, but also to find and support people not already known to the service). You might deliver outreach focused on rough sleeping, health, substance use, supporting sex workers, community or another type of outreach, but your team should encounter or work with women who are rough sleeping, even if only occasionally.

If you do not deliver outreach as above, please see the guidance for services on our website [here](#).

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BACKGROUND

Why is there a need for a census and 'gender-informed' outreach?

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.

There are also particular risks to women who are rough sleeping, including extremely prevalent experiences of gender-based violence and abuse, and an average age of death of 43 years old, even lower than male counterparts (45 years).

How can gender-informed outreach be part of the solution?

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census first took place in London in 2022 and has been delivered nationally since 2023. You can find previous census reports on the [census webpage](#).

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.

The methodology used differs from the usual rough sleeping snapshot count 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. The methodology therefore uses a gender-informed definition of women's rough sleeping and hidden homelessness and uses gender-informed outreach to gather data through a survey completed directly with women.

Gender-informed outreach takes into account the different experiences and patterns of rough sleeping and homelessness for women, adjusting hours, hotspots and approaches to better match women's experiences. It is also done with an understanding of women's safety risks and needs, how these may impact interactions and emergency responses which may be needed.

What will the census involve?

The census usually takes place in the last week of September. Check the census website for the latest information on dates [here](#)

The census consists of two components:

1. Census survey

A short survey to be completed with women who have experienced rough sleeping or hidden homelessness in the last three months. This helps us to hear directly from women about their experiences.

Answers to the survey are gathered in three main ways:

- Outreach teams conduct a survey on gender-informed outreach shifts during census week.
- Services conduct the survey with women they support during census week.

- Services come together to host women's census sessions in their borough during the census week (e.g. in day centres or at other key local hotspots).

2. Local Insights Meeting

After census week, local services come together in each borough to submit basic data about the number of women they work with who are rough sleeping. This can help to achieve an anonymised, representative picture of women rough sleeping in each borough.

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.

Each borough will have a census organiser for their county or combined authority, and likely a borough will lead to help coordinate and support services taking part in each local authority.

GUIDANCE

An overview: what does your outreach team need to do?

1. Familiarise yourselves with this guidance and attend census outreach training (or watch the recording online). Training should be available online by August.
2. Use this guidance to plan your gender-informed census outreach shifts for census week.
3. Attend the census Local Insights Meeting in your team's borough, after census week.

How should the outreach shifts be planned?

Outreach teams should plan their shifts according to this guidance and with careful consideration of the environment and experience within their borough. We recommend seeking local intelligence, particularly from women's specialist services, and looking at the patterns of women's rough sleeping that your outreach team observes, including any recent patterns and changes.

Where teams see few women and do not have access to any specialist local intelligence, we recommend following this guidance closely.

Some areas might see few women during usual outreach and snapshot counts: this may be for a multitude of reasons, but we encourage all areas to use this as an opportunity to test gender-informed practices.

We also encourage outreach teams to meet with other services in the borough to plan your census involvement. This can provide local intelligence to help with planning shifts; can offer opportunities to deliver joint shifts, increasing capacity and sharing expertise; and teams can learn about any women's spaces or day centre sessions which are offering support and opportunities to women during census week.

Gender-informed definition of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2022 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 is 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.

When should the gender-informed outreach shifts be conducted?

We are asking each borough taking part to conduct a minimum of 6 hours of gender-informed outreach within the census week, spread over at least three different days/times. Ideally, gender informed outreach should take place most days or every day during census week – 6 hours is the very minimum, and more are advised.

Outreach shifts should total enough hours to allow the team to cover all identified hotspots in the borough and test practices more likely to reach women.

Following consultation with outreach teams and other specialist services, as well as women with lived experience, we recommend that shifts are conducted during the following times:

- between 6am and 9am (to reach women as they are waking up or moving on).
- during the daytime (to reach women who might be using spaces open in the daytime, such as libraries).
- between 9pm and 1am (to reach women who might be moving on or bedding down as retail outlets close).

Outreach teams may not be able to cover all of these times but may wish to use local intelligence to inform you which shifts may be of particular benefit in your area. Where outreach teams are able to, testing shifts at each of these times would be beneficial.

In census week, all teams should record basic details about their gender-informed shifts (e.g. times, no. of workers, locations and hotspots visited). This will inform the methodology recorded in your local and national report.

Who should conduct the gender-informed outreach shifts?

Outreach should be done in twos as a minimum. Outreach shifts should be undertaken by outreach staff from each borough, paired with a volunteer if necessary. Men outreach workers/volunteers should be paired with a woman outreach worker or volunteer. All workers and volunteers taking part in the census should have attended or watched a recorded census outreach training session and read this guidance prior to undertaking a shift. You can access recorded training sessions on the website [here](#).

Which locations should the gender-informed outreach shifts go to?

We ask that each borough plan their gender-informed outreach shifts using their local intelligence and that of local services. Intelligence could come from other specialist services, staff working at the locations outlined below, community safety teams, security and enforcement teams, and local police. However, the census survey should not be conducted by or with anyone in security or police uniform as women may feel intimidated or fear repercussions.

We suggest that outreach teams consider the areas in which they usually see women rough sleeping and consider that women are much more likely to use more concealed and inconspicuous places.

Following consultation, we suggest focusing on the following types of spaces where women are more likely to be seen:

- Quieter streets, estates and stairwells
- Parks/green spaces, graveyards, benches
- Gated garden squares
- Car parks, including underground or multi-storey car parks.
- Restaurant and shop doorways
- Libraries
- Inside train/tube/bus stations – particularly including toilets at night or in the early morning.
- A&E waiting rooms – particularly including toilets.
- McDonald's/Burger King etc. - including toilets.
- In shop and restaurant doorways, particularly just before opening or after closing.
- Around soup kitchens/inside churches or other places of worship
- Around homeless health services – GPs, mental health drop in, substance use drop ins.
- Around day centres and hostels (where women may not be living but may have reason to go to or be nearby)
- Around Housing Options departments where women may present
- Inside freely accessible public spaces in which women can be inconspicuous and are unlikely to be asked to move on, e.g. shopping centres, or open access arts centres like the Southbank Centre.

Not all outreach teams will be able to access all of these areas, particularly where there are safety concerns, but consider this within your team's and local area's context.

Who should the outreach workers approach?

The methodology of this census recognises that women who are rough sleeping may not be physically bedded down in a sleeping bag when workers see them and aims to reach out to a broader range of women whose rough sleeping patterns and homelessness circumstances may look different, as per the definition.

Each gender-informed outreach shift will have at least one professional outreach worker undertaking it, and professional judgement will be key in determining who to approach (when a woman's housing situation may not be clear), and also how to approach (ensuring that the approach is appropriate, sensitive to a woman's circumstances and not perceived as intrusive). Other than professional judgement, and approaching women who are bedded down, about to bed down or sitting/standing next to bedding (as per a usual shift), the following tips could be useful in knowing who to approach:

- Women who are engaged in any form of street activity (begging, street drinking, in groups with other people who are sleeping rough).
- Women in enclosed spaces such as train/tube stations, McDonalds, A&E waiting rooms, libraries etc. who appear to be vulnerable and/or may not be using the services in the intended way but may be sheltering there, and/or may have a number of belongings with them.
- If workers observe patrolling police/PCSOs, ask them whether they are aware of any women who appear vulnerable/may be experiencing homelessness in the area. Professional judgement should always be

used when working with the police, and this suggestion is for local intel purposes on women's locations only: women should not be approached to do the survey with any form of police involvement or presence, or with anyone in uniform (unless they already have a strong rapport with an individual).

We recommend that outreach teams approach women sensitively and without making any assumptions. Outreach workers may wish to open up a conversation about the census and/or their work and gently enquire about the person's current circumstances. The survey will have an opening blurb to be used as an introduction, and we have some examples of opening lines below.

Important to note: Women's homelessness and rough sleeping can be complicated and often not linear – for example, women may have a hostel bed space but spend some time sleeping rough with a partner, because they feel unsafe in the hostel or for other reasons. They may have their own tenancy but feel unable to return to it, perhaps due to risk. Some women may be alternating between rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness or insecure housing e.g. sofa surfing or staying with a dangerous partner. Workers don't need to be sure of a woman's exact circumstances in order to proceed: if she would like to take part in the survey and has experienced any form of homelessness in the last three months, we will be able to understand her experience from her survey responses.

Try something like this...

"Hello, we're outreach workers, how are you doing today? Is it ok if we speak to you? Thank you. We are hoping to speak to women who have recent experience of not having a safe place to stay/housing or homelessness issues. Is that something that you have experienced?"

We have some information that might help, and we would also like to ask few questions for some research that's being done to help women experiencing homelessness. We won't ask anything identifying like your name or date of birth, and it's completely up to you if you want to take part or not. We are offering £10 vouchers for your time – the questions will take couple of minutes."

Can the census survey be conducted outside of gender-informed outreach?

If outreach workers have the capacity to do so, they can conduct the census survey with women they meet outside of the gender-informed shifts. Outreach teams can also do more than the minimum 6 hours of gender-informed shifts if they have capacity to do so. Please note down all shifts completed.

Regardless of when the census survey is conducted, we ask that any team members conducting the census have watched the training. Workers should also be mindful of the circumstances and whether any women staff or volunteers are present. Whenever the census survey is completed, workers should explain the census, provide the privacy notice and offer the voucher as a thank you for taking part.

Although the census survey can be conducted outside of gender-informed shifts, it is important to deliver specific gender-informed census shifts so that teams can test different practices and use local intelligence to reach different women and in a different way. In the 2024 census, 5% of respondents were not working with any services at all, and 43% were not receiving support from any homelessness service, highlighting the importance of trying to reach more women.

What should non-rough sleeping/non-commissioned outreach teams do?

Services who deliver outreach, but who don't deliver commissioned rough sleeping outreach (e.g. Find and Treat teams, drug and alcohol services, services supporting sex workers, women's specialist outreach, community outreach) can also conduct the survey on their outreach shifts. If services don't conduct women-specific outreach, we suggest following the guidance in this document as far as possible.

Where services deliver women-specific outreach and have practices which are already tailored to and work well for women, we suggest conducting your shifts as usual.

Services may also wish to deliver combined shifts with other outreach teams or services in their area, including the commissioned rough sleeping team. This can help to share expertise and local intelligence in both directions, can support multi-agency working and can expand the support offer to any women seen on shifts.

We encourage any outreach teams to get in touch if you have any additional questions.

What will the survey be like and how will the survey be done?

The survey will be on an online survey platform so outreach workers/volunteers can access it easily via smartphone or tablet when on shift. A printable version of the survey will be available for use if needed, as will the surveys translated. The survey link will be available to access from your local census organiser shortly before census week.

Workers should provide a privacy notice or similar to women taking part and explain the purpose of the research. Workers should make clear that participation is entirely voluntary, there are no identifying questions, and the resulting research will be completely anonymised. Once the information has been given to the woman, she can decide if the survey is relevant for her and if she wants to take part.

Most local censuses offer a £10 voucher to respondents as a thank you: check with your local census organiser for details.

The survey questions include the following themes:

- Where they have stayed over the last 3 months
- Duration and frequency of homelessness
- Services they are accessing.
- Whether they have already been asked these questions by someone else this week
- Demographic questions such as ethnicity, gender, age (this will not record DOB)

NB. Anyone who identifies as a woman should be offered the opportunity to take part in this survey. Those who identify as non-binary and feel the study's gender themes are relevant to their experiences should be offered the opportunity to take part in this survey.

The question themes have been carefully selected from a range of possible options. Each option has been evaluated with the aim of achieving a careful balance of data quality, sensitivity and research needs.

As well as asking women to complete the survey, what other information should workers have with them?

Any contact made between outreach workers and women experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness is important for the census but is also a vital opportunity to start to connect women with support, information and resources, or build on an existing relationship. Each contact should therefore be as meaningful as possible, and, as in usual outreach practice, should provide women with choice, information and should be responsive to her needs at that time and at her pace.

Some women who are approached may just want to do the survey, but it is likely that some women will need direct assistance and advice and may not have been seen by the outreach team before. As each shift will have at least one professional outreach worker carrying it out, they will be able to provide information and advice as usual. We also ask that outreach workers familiarize themselves with information about women's services and support in the area and familiarize themselves with safety planning techniques and responses. This might be needed if workers meet a woman who discloses that she is in a dangerous situation or relationship, for example, or who has recently experienced violence, including sexual assault.

Outreach teams should also provide service information sheets to women met during the census: local census organisers or outreach teams should edit the census template provided to make it specific to your borough, including timings and addresses for any local women's services or spaces.

As reported in our lived experience consultations, many women experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness may be unsure of how or where to access support, and service information sheets can provide her with vital

information that she can use and refer to in her own time, even if she is unable or unwilling to talk to outreach workers when they approach, or is hampered in doing so by those around her.

Your borough-specific services information sheet should include:

- Your service information if they wish to contact you at a later date.
- Contact details and map to local day centre/advice service.
- Opening times and locations of any local women's spaces
- StreetLink self-referral information
- Local Housing Options department information
- Local VAWG and women's services, including domestic abuse support and local Rape Crisis service.
- Immigration advice service information
- Welfare benefits contact information.
- Useful numbers to call – National Domestic Abuse Helpline, Samaritans, Police non-emergency, NHS 111
- Crisis team contact number (borough specific)
- Mental health support via text message details (text SHOUT to 85258 free confidential 24/7 messaging mental health support service)

All workers should be equipped with information on how to refer to any emergency safe spaces that are available to their borough, e.g. night shelters or respite rooms.

Each outreach team should follow their usual policies and procedures with respect to safeguarding concerns and emergency situations (including women who are pregnant, at immediate risk, or under 18).

If able to, outreach teams should make use of telephone translators and translated copies of surveys where needed to make sure that all women are able to fully participate in this survey. (Some translations are provided by the central census team).

How can we receive vouchers and volunteer support?

The census will be coordinated in your area by a local organiser. Most areas participating in the census provide vouchers as a thank you for women who are met on outreach shifts and take part in the census survey. Teams should contact their organisers to enquire about and arrange delivery of vouchers.

To support capacity for the census and to ensure there is at least one woman in every outreach pair, the local census organisers may recruit volunteers where possible who can support various teams (and possibly outreach shifts).

Teams should contact their local census organisers about volunteers or recruit their own volunteers. Volunteers will also need to be supervised when shift.

What else should the outreach workers and volunteers take with them?

It would be helpful if outreach workers could offer water/energy bars/toiletries/other items to help with engagement and to meet any basic and immediate needs where possible.

What happens after the shift?

The surveys should be completed in real time on the online survey platform. Where it has been necessary to use paper copies of the survey, the information should be input into the online survey platform as soon as possible. Paper copies can be shredded and disposed of after they have been submitted online. Survey responses must be submitted as soon as possible after census week (your local organiser may set a specific deadline).

The survey results will go to the local census organisers who may produce a report. Results will also be sent securely to the central census team who will produce a national census report.

Representatives from the outreach team should then attend the borough-wide census Local Insights Meeting, which should take place shortly after census week.

CENSUS LOCAL INSIGHTS MEETING

If you are leading your borough's census Local Insights Meeting, please see the census guidance for organisers.

If you are representing your team at a Local Insights Meeting, you need to prepare in advance by:

- Familiarising yourself with this guidance.
- Reach out to your local census organiser to confirm the date and time of the meeting and your attendance.
- Signing and returning the data sharing protocol; and
- Compiling a list of women who meet the criteria listed below.

What is the purpose of the Local Insights Meeting?

The census survey is important for hearing directly from women about their experiences of rough sleeping. The Local Insights Meeting, however, can provide quantitative information about women rough sleeping in the borough, supporting a representative understanding of the numbers of women rough sleeping in each area (whether or not they are seen during the census week or snapshot count).

The Local Insights Meeting also provides the opportunity for a range of services across the borough to come together and share their experience of supporting women who are rough sleeping in the area.

How will the meeting work?

There are two ways this meeting will be organised.

1. One is where the organiser will address each service in turn and will ask for the number of women the service has worked with who meet the census criteria. The service should therefore be prepared to provide; verbally list the initials of each woman they work with. If you think your service may also have worked with that woman, you should raise this with the meeting organiser, and you and the service can check whether this is a shared case – this might be done by then sharing their date of birth.

2. The second method is that the organiser should ask each service for the number of women the service has worked with who meet the census criteria in advance. This might be straight after census week to allow a few weeks to do this. The service should therefore be prepared to provide electronically a list of the initials of each woman they work with, alongside their dates of birth. The organiser will then cross-compare all initials and dates of birth they are given by all services, to determine any shared cases.

Any information shared (electronically or verbally) should be done so with data protections in place, including password protections for emails, and a signed data sharing protocol which you will be provided by the organiser. For both methods, any confirmed shared cases will be noted as duplicates so that the meeting organiser can calculate an accurate number of women rough sleeping in the borough. Once all figures have been shared, the meeting organiser will facilitate a conversation within the meeting about the particular experiences and needs of women who are rough sleeping within the borough, and any learnings from conducting the census.

How will the data be used?

Any identifying information shared in the meeting should be minimal and for the purposes of the meeting only: by signing a data sharing agreement, services agree to not use or share this information outside of the meeting. The data submitted in the meeting will have all identifying information removed after the meeting.

Anonymous data from the meeting will be submitted to the central census team for the national report. The local census organisers may use this data to produce findings or a report for the local area. Data collected from the

meeting and census survey will be treated separately, rather than being combined. No personal or identifying information will be shared.

It should be noted that although we encourage all services to attend, no service will be required to provide data at the census Local Insights Meeting: involvement is by choice.

Compiling your list

If your service regularly records case management data about the women you work with (e.g. name, date of birth), create a list of women who you work with who meet the criteria. Your list should include only initials and year of birth for each woman – you may want to note down some additional information for your own use (e.g. full name, we joint work with x service for this client), but no further identifying information will be recorded at the meeting.

If your service does not record case management information, simply note the total number of women who meet the criteria.

Criteria for inclusion:

- Have experienced rough sleeping according to the census definition at any point within three months prior to the census (e.g. July to September).
- Have worked with or have been known to your service in the last three months (July to September)

You may also wish to mention women who you are aware of and concerned about, but who aren't working with your service: for example, women you may have received referrals for but haven't found, or women you see regularly who haven't yet worked with the service. These numbers will be recorded separately but will be taken into account.

In the meeting, there should also be an opportunity to discuss any themes, and system challenges your service notices in providing support for women who are rough sleeping. You may therefore wish to note anything your team would like to raise.

What if my team is unable to share details about individual clients?

We understand that some services may not be able to share this information within this context. We encourage all services to review the data sharing protocol to confirm how the data will be used, but it is fine to decide that your service cannot share this information. Even if your service is unable to share information about individual clients, your insights and input into the meeting will still be very valuable.

Your service can attend the meeting and state the number of women that you work with, 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 - it won't be possible to cross reference and account for duplicate clients, but this information still helps to create a representative picture within the borough.

You can also take part in the discussion elements of the meeting, including reflecting on the particular challenges your clients or service users face. If you wish to attend the meeting for the discussion section only, speak to the meeting organiser about what time to attend.

What if my service can't attend the Local Insights Meeting?

If you wish to take part in the meeting, but cannot attend due to scheduling conflicts, you should provide your compiled list to the meeting organiser at least 24 hours prior to the meeting time.

If your service works across multiple boroughs and you can't attend all the relevant borough meetings, please contact your local census organiser or the central census team.

FURTHER DETAILS

What support will be offered to teams taking part in the census?

Each area will have a local census organiser to lead and plan the census. In some areas, the census may be organised by the combined authority with additional census leads in each borough.

Each outreach shift will have at least one professional in each pair, so this assumes a good level of training and knowledge on safe outreach practice, dynamic risk assessment, etc. However, we would ask that all workers and volunteers taking part in the gender-informed outreach shifts attend or watch a recorded training session, whether they have previous experience or not. This will include:

- An overview of the census work, women's homelessness and rough sleeping and the additional risks women face when rough sleeping.
- Guidance about how to conduct the survey and outreach shifts, and how the Local Insights Meeting will work.
- An overview of trauma-informed interactions and suggested safe working practices.

Visit the census webpage to register for the session or watch the recording:

www.solacewomensaid.org/womens-rough-sleeping-census

For more information

Sign up to the census mailing list to ensure all updates, resources and relevant forms for the census reach you, including the final report once published: <https://forms.office.com/r/Dfkey1UUiE>

Webpage: www.solacewomensaid.org/womens-rough-sleeping-census

Contact address: womens.census@solacewomensaid.org

The census would not be possible without the time, commitment and effort of everyone involved. We would like to say a huge thank you to staff, volunteers and services who are taking part in the census activity, and women with lived experience who have contributed to and informed this work.

Thank you to all the practitioners who took part in census focus groups and feedback sessions, which supported us to develop the census methodology and informed this guidance.