

Guidance for services

Women's Rough Sleeping Census



GUIDANCE FOR SERVICES

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 for services which sometimes work with women who experience homelessness and rough sleeping, even if this isn’t your service’s core area of support. This includes homelessness support services, day centres, VAWG and women’s services, health teams, drug and alcohol services, Community groups including faith groups and food banks, immigration support services, and more.

If you deliver outreach which reaches people who are rough sleeping, please see the guidance for outreach on our website [here](#).

CONTENTS

BACKGROUND.....	3
GUIDANCE	4
An overview: what does your service need to do?	4
Gender-informed definition of rough sleeping	4
When should the census survey be conducted?.....	5
What women should participate in the survey?	5
What does the survey ask, and how should it be completed?	6
Day centre or hotspot ‘census sessions’	7
What additional information should workers have with them?	7
What happens after the surveys have been completed?	8
CENSUS LOCAL INSIGHTS MEETING.....	8
FURTHER DETAILS.....	10
What support will be offered to teams taking part in the census?	10
For more information	11

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 Women's Rough Sleeping Census first took place in London in 2022 and has been delivered nationally since 2023, with over 88 areas taking part in 2024. 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
- 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, and might avoid homelessness services, which are often accessed predominantly by men.

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

We are therefore asking different types of services to take part in the census so that we can reach as many women as possible and build an accurate and comprehensive picture, taking into account women's varied circumstances and the services which support them.

Which services should be involved?

If your service sometimes works with women who experience homelessness, it's likely that some of the women you work with might be rough sleeping or experiencing hidden homelessness according to the census definition and can be included in the census. Your service might be a VAWG, health, drug and alcohol, immigration support service or a community group, or another type of service.

We use a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping (as detailed in this guidance) to better reflect women's experiences, which might not involve sleeping outside visibly on the street.

Even if only a small proportion of the women you work with fall within this definition, your involvement can help us to gain a better understanding and reach women whose voices are not usually heard.

NB. Teams which work in uniform (e.g. security, police or enforcement teams) shouldn't conduct the survey directly with women when in uniform, and might want to consider if they can link up with another service to do

the survey. Being approached by someone in uniform can feel intimidating, even if workers are very well-intentioned (unless they have a strong rapport with an individual).

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

The census consists of two components:

1. Census survey

A short survey to be completed with women who have recently experienced rough sleeping/hidden homelessness. This helps us to hear directly from women about their experiences.

Answers to the survey are gathered in three main ways:

- Services conduct the survey with the women they support during census week
- Services come together to host women's census sessions in their local area during the census week (e.g. in day centres or at other key local hotspots)
- Outreach teams conduct the survey on gender-informed outreach shifts during census week.

2. Census Local Insights Meeting

After census week, local services will come together in each local area 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.

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

GUIDANCE

An overview: what does your service need to do?

1. Familiarise yourselves with this guidance and attend census services training (or watch the recording online). Training should be available online by August.
2. Use this guidance to plan how your team will conduct the census survey with your service users during census week.
3. Attend the census Local Insights Meeting in your team's borough, after census week.

Gender-informed definition of rough sleeping

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 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.

When should the census survey be conducted?

The survey should be conducted throughout census week. Services should offer the survey to women who may be experiencing rough sleeping or hidden homelessness (according to the census definition) and who they meet or speak to during that week, whether in person or on the phone. Services should conduct the survey throughout the week during the service's usual opening times, unless this is a direct contradiction to the gender-informed guidance (e.g. only doing outreach at night).

The census takes place over 7 days to account for services which may be open over the weekend. We do not ask anyone to do weekend work for the census where this is not already part of their service.

What women should participate in the survey?

The methodology of this census recognises that women who are rough sleeping may not be physically bedded down in a sleeping bag or visible during the night. We therefore aim to reach out to a broader range of women whose rough sleeping and homelessness patterns and circumstances may look different, as per the definitions.

Women's rough sleeping can be complicated and often not linear – for example, women may have a hostel bed space but spend some time sleeping rough, because they feel unsafe in the hostel or for other reasons. They may have their own tenancy but not feel able to return to it, for example, 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.

The survey is for all women who have slept rough and/or experienced hidden homelessness in the last 3 months, according to the gender-informed definition of rough sleeping in this guidance.

The survey is for anyone who identifies as a woman and people who identify as non-binary and feel the study's gender themes are relevant to their experiences.

Included in the survey is a question to ask if respondents have already taken part in the survey during the week to help minimise double-counting where possible.

How to approach

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).

You may be aware of some women's housing circumstances, but if a woman is new to your service, it may not be clear what their circumstances are. Depending on the service, workers may wish to enquire more gently about a service user's circumstances before introducing the census and offering to complete the survey with them, for example, 'What's your housing situation at the moment?' or 'Do you have a safe place to stay at the moment?'.

Workers don't need to be sure of a woman's exact circumstances to proceed: if she would like to take part in the survey, her experiences can usually be understood from her survey responses.

Depending on staffing and volunteer availability, we suggest trying to prioritise women workers to approach those completing the census.

Example Interactions

"Hello, how are you doing today? We're taking part in research to try and help women who are experiencing homelessness. We are hoping to speak to women who have recent experience of being homeless or not having a safe place to stay. Is that something that you have experienced?"

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. The questions will take a couple of minutes."

What does the survey ask, and how should it be completed?

The census lead for your participating area should distribute an online survey platform link (usually microsoft forms) for you to access via smartphone, tablet or computer when they are with women. A printable version of the survey will be available for use if needed.

The survey link will be available to access from your local census organiser shortly before census week.

Your census organiser should also be able to provide you with a word document, and/or translated surveys as necessary.

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 provided, they can decide if the survey is relevant to them and if they want to take part.

We suggest nominating a single point of contact for the service to ensure all relevant census information is received and shared amongst all service staff, and to ensure that all workers can offer the survey to all women service users. All workers conducting the survey should have read this guidance and have a full understanding of what the census is for and who should be included.

The survey should be conducted directly/in person with respondents, rather than sending the survey link to potential respondents. This is important to ensure explanation of the research, consistency of data collection and minimise double counting, and allows practitioners to complete additional questions for the service.

If able to and where needed, teams should make use of telephone translators and translated copies of surveys to make sure that all women are able to fully participate in this survey.

The survey

The survey questions are all voluntary, and respondents can answer as many or as few as they wish. 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)

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

Day centre or hotspot 'census sessions'

You may wish to host a women's census session during census week as an opportunity to encourage more women to attend your service and access support, as well as increasing capacity to conduct the census survey with women you work with. You may wish to put up posters to advertise what will be happening.

You could arrange in-reach services to attend your census session or day, such as health, wellbeing or domestic abuse practitioners.

You could link up with local services who can also encourage women to attend and access support.

Census volunteers could be allocated to your census session to support capacity for completing the survey.

Services with limited capacity or time with clients/service users

Some services may work with or encounter women who experience rough sleeping, but may struggle with capacity to be able to complete the survey with women during census week. This might be a busy homeless health service, or GP practice for example.

You may wish to make a request for volunteers to attend your service to complete the survey with women on one day during census week. You may wish to put up posters to advertise what will be happening.

Hotspot locations

Your team may know of other locations or services in your area which might be well-attended by women and could be good places to conduct the survey. These could be allocated as hotspot locations which volunteers could attend on a day during census week to complete the census survey with women. This could also be useful local intelligence for your local area's census outreach shifts.

Appropriate hotspot areas might be a busy A&E waiting room, a busy train station which you think women are likely to frequently attend, or another well-frequented service.

Vouchers and volunteers

The census will be coordinated in your area by a local organiser. Where possible areas participating in the census should provide £10 vouchers as a thank you for women who take part in the census survey at census sessions. Teams should contact their organisers to enquire about vouchers. London Local area's participating may also be able to be gifted these vouchers by the WRSC census team.

To support capacity for the census, local census organisers may recruit volunteers where possible who can support various teams. Teams should contact their local census organisers about volunteers, or could recruit their own volunteers.

If you would like to deliver a census session or suggest a hotspot area, let your local census organiser know.

What additional information should workers have with them?

Any contact made with women experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness can be an important opportunity to connect women with support, information and resources, or build on an existing relationship. Each contact should therefore be as meaningful as possible, and should provide women with choice and information and should be responsive to her needs and pace at that time.

Discussing the survey may also bring to light information or risks about a service user which were previously unknown. Some women may not wish to discuss this further, but some women may need direct assistance and advice and may not have discussed their circumstances with anyone before. You may also have concerns about a person's safety. Services should follow usual practices in providing information, advice and support, and safeguarding measures.

Appropriate support and advice may involve completing referrals, using Duty to Refer processes, completing safeguarding practices or other forms of support. Services should remember to inform service users about any safeguarding processes they need to enact and secure consent for any referrals which require it. Services should also consider where they may be able to take further action to support service users within their role, perhaps through working closely with other agencies, following up referrals, writing a supporting or introductory letter, or making a Streetlink referral with her consent where relevant.

Where a service user may not wish to talk about her circumstances, effective signposting to relevant local services could be valuable to her, especially where she can consider this information at a later date. We suggest having printed details available for local services as listed below, particularly any women's services. A template for filling in this local service information can be downloaded from the census webpage, and your local census organiser may already have an edited copy for your area.

- Contact details and map to local day centre/advice service and any women's services
- StreetLink self-referral information
- Local VAWG and women's services, including domestic abuse support and Rape Crisis services
- Local Housing Options department information
- Useful numbers to call – National Domestic Abuse Helpline, Samaritans, NHS 111, Police 101
- Immigration advice service information
- Welfare benefits contact information
- 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)

NB. The distinction between information taken for the service's purposes and information taken for the census via the survey must be made clear to ensure respondents are aware of where their information is being recorded and how it will be used.

What happens after the surveys have been completed?

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.

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

CENSUS LOCAL INSIGHTS MEETING

Representatives from the service should then attend the local area's census Local Insights Meeting, which should take place shortly after census week.

If you are leading your local area's census Local Insights Meeting, please see the census guidance for organisers. **NB.** The meeting will follow the same format as the previous data meetings.

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

- Familiarising yourself with this guidance;
- Reaching 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 date's of birth they are given from 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. In the meeting, you may want to note if you think any women on your list may use an alias.

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 the last three months (July to September)
- Have worked with or have been known to your service in the three months before the census takes place
- Please note, this census is open to all women and people who feel the gender themes of this survey apply to them.

You may also wish to mention women who you are aware of and concerned about, but who aren't working your service, for example women you may have received referrals for but haven't yet accessed the service, or women who may be known to your service but who you may not yet be working with. 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 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 join the meeting for the discussion section only, please speak with the meeting organiser to determine the appropriate 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 before the meeting time.

If your service works across multiple boroughs and you can't attend all the local area 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.

We would ask that all workers and volunteers taking part in the census through delivering the survey 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 how the Local Insights Meeting will work
- A brief overview of trauma-informed interactions
- Gender-informed safety planning and resources

Visit the census webpage to watch the recordings and view any upcoming sessions:

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

For more information

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.