

SEVERE WEATHER EMERGENCY



How prepared are
UK homelessness
systems for the
impacts of climate
change?

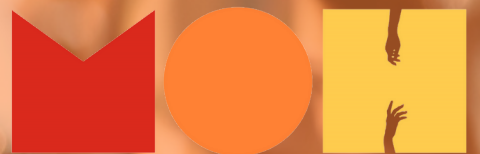


Table of Contents

CONTENTS

01-02

about this investigation

03

About the data

04-05

A potted history of SWEP

06-09

Overall findings

10-13

Findings - Quality of offer

14

Findings - Safety

15-17

Findings - Extreme heat

18

Findings - Extreme rain

19-22

Findings - Barriers and comms

23-24

Recommendations and References

In the summer of 2022, the UK was swept with some of the hottest weather ever seen here. The heatwaves were by no means restricted to the UK; across the world, countries struggled with drought and wildfires. In the UK, parks became parched and the topic of poorly insulated homes came to the surface as a national conversation about climate change began.

This was not an entirely new kind of conversation for MoH. In our work, we regularly see cycles of news media and public concern for people experiencing homelessness during bad weather, but it often drifts out of attention as soon as the weather changes.

However, the conversations have continued within Museum of Homelessness, and amongst our Homeless Taskforce Partners. We are worried that climate emergency is going to hit people living outside the hardest and fastest. We have carried out an investigation and analysis designed to help our homelessness systems be ready for the increasing frequency of climate events.

The best way of measuring that is to take a good look at SWEP. Within homelessness, extreme weather is handled by an instrument called Severe Weather Emergency Protocol.

Until this investigation, as far as we are aware there had been no comprehensive data set on what councils and homelessness charities actually do in periods of extreme weather. We wanted to produce an accurate record of what councils and services are doing, to see where improvements could be made and to make recommendations for climate emergency preparedness in the UK.

Given the lacklustre efforts to combat climate change, it is likely that extreme weather events will make life increasingly dangerous for people who are experiencing street homelessness and precariously housed in the future.

This project seeks to address this. We offer a comprehensive picture of what 91 councils are doing during periods of extreme weather and combines that with observations, recommendations, and feedback from the ground. We understand our concerns are shared by colleagues in the wider sector and by those setting policy. We hope that these findings are useful.



“there is no legal requirement for Local Authorities to provide shelter for everyone during severe weather. However, it is widely accepted that there is a humanitarian obligation to provide SWEP and prevent death.”⁽¹⁾

ABOUT THIS INVESTIGATION

Terminology

- SWEP is Severe Weather Emergency Protocol
- CHAIN is the Combined Homelessness and Information Network database
- NRPF is No Recourse to Public Funds. An immigration rule which prevents people from accessing welfare benefits and other forms of support.
- In for Good is the principle under which once a person is supported to access shelter or accommodation, they are not asked to leave until there is a support plan in place to end their rough sleeping.
- Conditionality means being required to meet certain criteria or behave a certain way in order to receive help

ABOUT THE DATA

We sent Freedom of Information requests to 91 Local Authorities across England and Wales. The sample size reflects a desire to capture information from areas where it can be reasonably ascertained that there is a population of people sleeping rough. The sample also represents a decent overall percentage (in this case nearly one third) of all councils in England and Wales.

Areas were chosen on the basis that they were:

- In one of the top 50 populated cities in the UK.
- Had a rough sleeping count of 15 people or more in the 2021 Government figures. (2)
- All London boroughs were included.

PERIOD INVESTIGATED:

AUGUST 2020 >

JULY 2022

The period we have investigated included the Everyone In period. COVID related funding was a factor in increasing the length and quality of the SWEP offer, and we have identified and drawn this out as we have gone through the responses.

A note on criteria: We were assessing for **emergency protocol** related to **Severe Weather**. Therefore where a council has said they kept accommodation available for the whole winter, (for example during Everyone In) we have not counted it as a SWEP activation. Where a council has simply said they activated SWEP but are unable to provide any further information such as activation dates, actions taken/protocol or people assisted, we do not count this as adequate SWEP processes being in place.

Scope of investigation:

Desk research

Freedom of Information requests and analysis

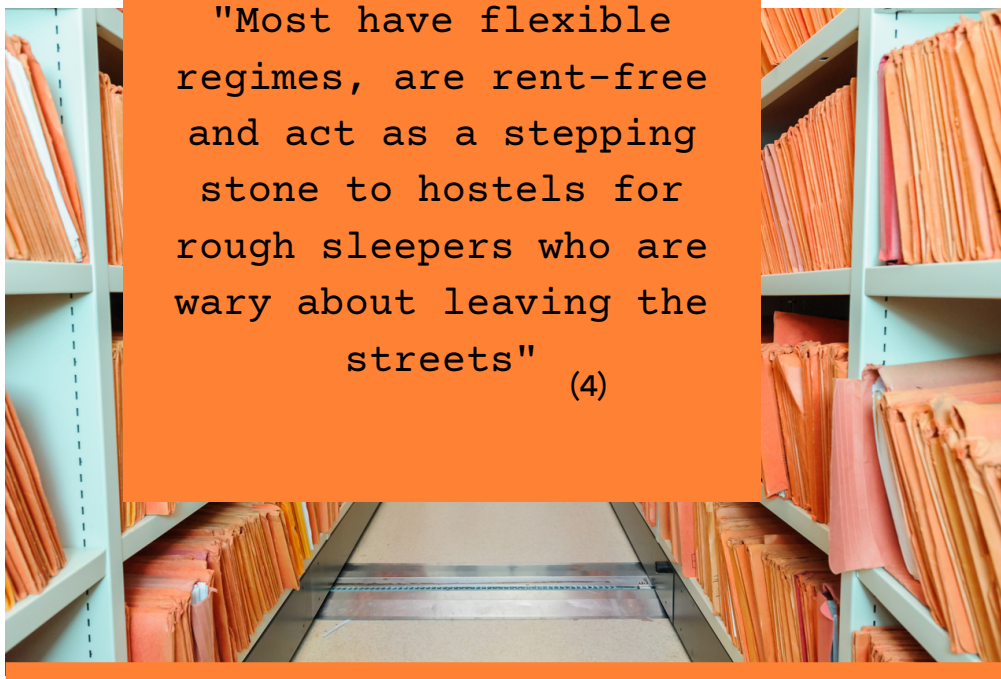
Submissions and testimony from grassroots organisations including Streets Kitchen, Simon Community, Street Storage, South Norwood Community Kitchen and Housing Action Teeside.

Consultation with people experiencing homelessness at community meetings and on street work.

Cold weather provision pre-dates SWEP and has a long-standing history. We can see the development of this within our archives. For example, the charity CRASH was set up in response to rough sleeping accommodation problems in the 1990s. In one year alone (1999/2000) they were involved in setting up 13 new cold weather shelters. (3)

Simon Community members recall cold weather shelters being accessible throughout the season. This is echoed in a 2003 study by Crisis.

SWEP began in the 2000s. The first mention we can find is in a Met Office report detailing work with Westminster Council in 2003 (5). It is only in the middle of the last decade that SWEP has become the subject of more intensive coordination from official sector bodies (Homeless Link, Greater London Authority). SWEP is still not mentioned in the Homelessness Code of Guidance published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities.



Since the formation of the coalition government in 2010, we have seen more regular mentions of SWEP in policy documents and briefings. Despite this, it is still not a legal obligation for councils to provide. Therefore, its implementation remains inconsistent, and ad-hoc.

We identify the launch of the national vision for No Second Night Out in 2011 as a key moment that introduced a conditional and targets-driven approach (6). The impact of this is detailed in our case studies looking at some of the barriers to help. By 2018, so many people were slipping through the net that in desperation Streets Kitchen opened the Sofia Solidarity Centre during 'Beast from the East,' with hundreds of people sheltering there within a few days. (7)

What we have found in this investigation demonstrates the conditionality and barriers baked into an under resourced and stressed homelessness system.

Tent housing a couple, Vauxhall, March 2018



Whilst many councils state that they make a response to extreme weather, the reality of decent, unconditional and safe offers of support is questionable. Provision can be watered down, offered to some and not all, subject to funding changes or side stepped altogether.

A POTTED HISTORY OF SWEP

FINDINGS - OVERALL

Our overall findings are that delivery of SWEP across local authorities in England and Wales is not meeting people's needs. It is inconsistently applied and is inadequate for many reasons. We've also found evidence that UK homelessness systems are not ready for the likely increase in extreme weather events.

26% of the councils in the study did not activate SWEP, or said they responded to extreme weather but were unable to provide a SWEP protocol, dates, information about the offer or on the number of people assisted. We carefully assessed each response for adequacy. For example, Newport had a drop in centre open for just 2 days out of the entire two-year period. This was a daytime offer, no provision was made for nighttime. It is clear that SWEP related needs are not being met. SWEP is not legally binding, meaning that the duty is possible to ignore. In practice, it means that people are left stranded in the extreme cold, extreme heat or heavy rain.

Example: Newport had a drop in centre open for just 2 days out of the two year period. This was a daytime offer, no provision was made for night time.

**MORE THAN A
QUARTER OF
COUNCILS IN THE
STUDY DID NOT
ACTIVATE SWEP,
OR DID NOT HAVE
INFORMATION ON
WHAT THEY DO IN
PERIODS THAT
SHOULD BE SWEP**

FINDINGS - OVERALL



WE TRACKED 44 POTENTIAL ACTIVATION DATES OVER THE TWO YEAR PERIOD. THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AREAS MAPPED HERE ACTIVATED SWEP 5 TIMES OR LESS.

FINDINGS - OVERALL

Bassetlaw, Blackpool,
Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff,
Cornwall County, Doncaster,
East Suffolk, Ipswich, Hull,
Leeds, Leicester, Mansfield,
Milton Keynes, Newport, North
Somerset, Plymouth,
Peterborough, Preston,
Sheffield, Slough,
Southampton, Sunderland,
Wallsall, Warrington, Wigan,
Wolverhampton, Worthing,
Harrow*, Bexley, Hillingdon.

LIST OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES THAT ACTIVATED SWEP 5 TIMES OR LESS**

*Harrow was the only local authority that didnt reply so we have included them here as non activators

**This includes local authorities Leeds and Leicester who said they activated SWEP but were unable to give dates or evidence the activations.

FINDINGS - OVERALL

Our data revealed a broad trend towards SWEP being less available post-pandemic with the number of days active falling by 16%.

Activations increased which suggests that the end of COVID-19 funding marked a return to more short-term and provisional system.

Year	Activations	Days
2020-2021	482	2871
2021-2022	578	2411

Data taken from 67 out of 91 councils

Mansfield District Council



Matt Turtle
By email only matt@museumofhomelessness.org

Our Reference: **FOI22/122**

25 August 2022

Dear Matt Turtle,

Thank you for your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), dated 05 August 2022. As per section 1 (1) (a) of the FOIA, Mansfield District Council (MDC) must inform in writing whether it holds information of the description specified in the request and if that is the case to have that communicated to the requestor.

I can confirm that in this instance, MDC does retain the requested information. As such, please find below a copy of your request along with our full response:

Since 1st August 2020 to 31st July 2022 please provide the following information:

- The number of times Severe Weather Emergency protocol was activated in the requested period. **Nil.**
- On each period that SWEP was active, please give the dates and times that it was active from and to. **Not applicable.**
- Detail of the protocol for each period (for example provision of indoor accommodation or street level assistance with water and suncream). **Not applicable.**
- Detail of whether using the protocol led to the adaptation of existing services. For example, were there temporary closures/suspension of existing services to open up new provision. **Not applicable.**
- If additional bedspaces were provided, were they offered to people beyond the period that SWEP was active for. **Not applicable.**
- Number of people assisted in each period. **Not applicable.**

OFFICIAL

Dear Matt Turtle

Freedom of Information Request Reference: 940663 (formerly 940044)
Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

Following our e-mail of Tuesday 09 August 2022, I can confirm that Plymouth City Council does not hold or record the information you have requested. Please accept our apologies for the delay in responding to your request for information.

Please note that the information supplied can be re-used in accordance with the Open Government Licence. For further details please see: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open%2Dgovernment%2Dlicence/>.

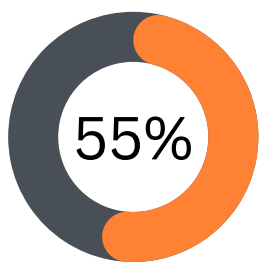
If you wish to discuss this e-mail please contact us. If you disagree with the way your request has been dealt with you can request a review by writing to me within 40 working days of the date of this e-mail. Please state the reasons for your dissatisfaction. Following a review, if you are still not satisfied with the way your request has been dealt with you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office via their website: <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/> or by writing to: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, SK9 5AF.

Information about the Freedom of Information Act 2000 can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website: <http://www.ico.org.uk>.

We also have information available on our website: <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/aboutcouncil/accessinformation/freedomofinformation/>

FINDINGS - QUALITY OF OFFER

The information we received from councils demonstrated a high level of 'ad-hoc' initiation of SWEP and SWEP being offered for short bursts. Only around half of councils offered further support, such as follow-on beds. The experiences of people who are homeless told us that the SWEP offers are not very accessible or don't feel safe. People told us that they wouldn't want to go inside just for one or two nights, as they might lose a good sleep site and have to start all over again. Another example given by Streets Kitchen volunteers was about bedding, pods or tents. To access SWEP meant either leaving those outside or giving up belongings, and this was not an option for many people.



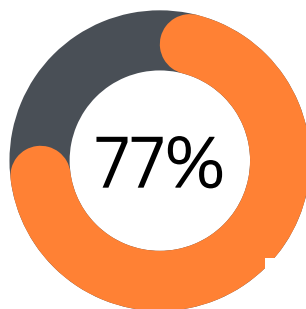
of the councils who did activate SWEP, 55% provide 'short burst' SWEP, often for one or two nights only.

“ One member had been picked up in extreme cold and taken to a SWEP shelter. He was approached at midnight, by the time he got to the shelter it was 2am, he couldn't sleep because he didn't really know where he was, he got a few hours sleep and then the shelter closed in the morning, he was miles from where he was picked up and had no means to travel back other than walk. Luckily, he was fit enough to do so, but recognised that not everyone is. This put him off going in again. ”

Simon Community

FINDINGS - QUALITY OF OFFER

The Greater London Authority response included information on their In For Good Principle. This means that a person is not asked to leave accommodation until a plan to end their rough sleeping is in place. However elsewhere in the investigation we found evidence that this is limited to people who are 'verified rough sleepers' meaning that those who have more complicated situations or are outside the reach of services are not supported.



of people who accessed pan London overflow SWEP provision had not returned to sleeping rough in the following six months, according to the GLA.(8)

- *If additional bedspaces were provided, were they offered to people beyond the period that SWEP was active for.*

As per the London SWEP guidance, all councils are asked to commit to the 'In for Good' principle. This means that once someone has accessed SWEP accommodation, they are accommodated until a support plan is in place to end their rough sleeping, regardless of whether the temperature has risen above 0°C.

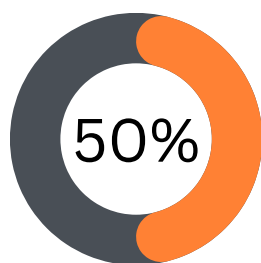
This principle is strictly applied in pan-London overflow SWEP commissioned by the GLA and as a result, most people will stay in the bedspace beyond the period SWEP is active for. A review of SWEP provision in the winter of 2020-21 found that in the six months following their stay in pan-London overflow SWEP, 77% of people had not returned to sleeping rough.

Terminology

- SWEP is Severe Weather Emergency Protocol
- Activation is the opening of SWEP to new referrals
- Deactivation is the closing of SWEP to new referrals
- Pan-London activation is the centrally coordinated activation of SWEP by the GLA across all
- London's boroughs and including GLA overflow provision
- Overflow provision is GLA-funded SWEP provision accessible by all London boroughs when local provision reaches capacity
- In for Good is the principle under which once a person is supported to access shelter or accommodation, they are not asked to leave until there is a support plan in place to end their rough sleeping.

FINDINGS - QUALITY OF OFFER

Only around half of councils offered further support such as follow-on beds or other wraparound support when people come in for SWEP. One worker from Stockton-On-Tees told us about a practice of using a fire alarm to get everyone out of their rooms. This would be done to inform people that SWEP was ended and everyone had to reapply at the council office – a 40–60-minute walk away for a reasonably fit person. In this case, several people reported weren't offered any new accommodation by the council when they arrived.



of the councils who did activate SWEP 50% do not offer wrap around or follow on support to people.

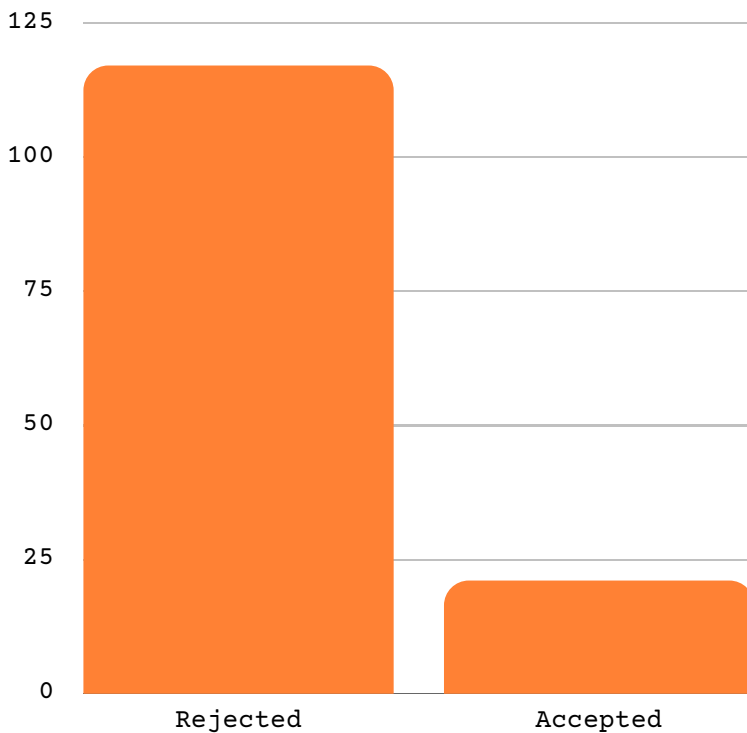


It could have been an opportunity to engage several hard-to-reach rough sleepers in the leadup to Christmas. Instead they were placed in a hotel with no support and seem to have been evicted (in quite a deceitful way) at the earliest opportunity.

Stockton-on-Tees



FINDINGS - QUALITY OF OFFER



The City of London shared detail on how many people accepted an offer of SWEP. In winter 2020/21 SWEP was offered 138 times to 49 individuals. The offer was accepted 21 times by 20 individuals and declined on 117 occasions. We asked people why offers would be refused

REASONS GIVEN FOR NOT ACCEPTING SWEP OFFERS:

THE QUALITY OF THE OFFER

LOCATION OF THE OFFER/TRAVEL REQUIRED

THE LENGTH OF TIME OFFERED/

DISRUPTION TO ROUTINE

FEELING SAFER ON THE STREETS

CONCERN ABOUT LOSING BELONGINGS OR SLEEP SITE

CONDITIONALITY OF OFFER (HAVING TO BE ON CHAIN)

LACK OF TRUST IN SERVICES

FINDINGS - SAFETY

Safety was a recurring theme in what people experiencing homelessness wanted to share. Three men aged 67, 65 and 63 we spoke to who were outside in Camden during a SWEP period told us they felt safer on the streets than going into the hostel they were allocated to. There is a mismatch in understandings of what is safe between the services and the people who use them.

As the information requested is already reasonably accessible elsewhere it is exempt under the exception in Regulation 6(1).

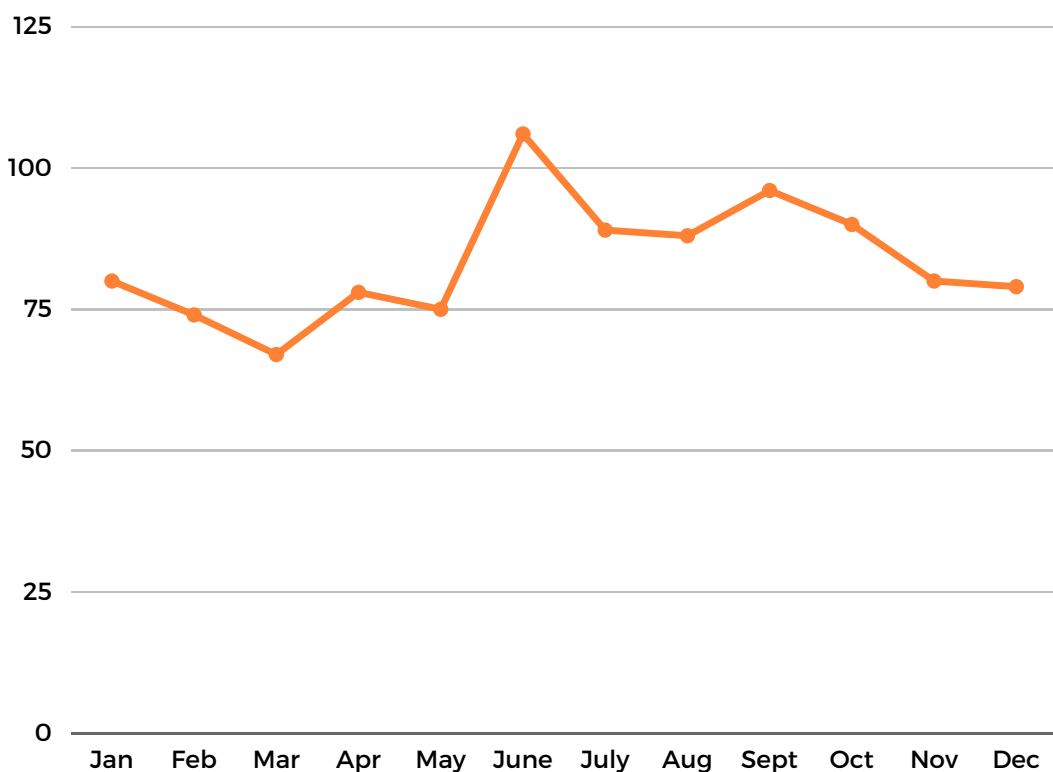
4. Detail of whether using the protocol led to the adaptation of existing services. For example, were there temporary closures/suspension of existing services to open up new provision.

During the activation of SWEP Camden adapts the operations of its rough sleeping team to ensure the safety of those on the street. For example, we open additional emergency bed spaces in our short-stay projects and hostels, offer hotels and B&Bs. Outreach patterns can be changed to ensure we find all people rough sleeping. Additionally, outreach is prioritised over other work to ensure people are safe.

In cold weather the gamble is with safety. They know that the only chance of being picked up is to be central, but then this comes with the dangers of people. The group mostly felt that being too visible was more dangerous than the cold and the chances of being picked up by the outreach were too slim and not worth the risk. There was a general feeling that if you don't engage then people stop asking you if you need help.

Simon Community

FINDINGS - EXTREME HEAT



This graph shows the numbers of people experiencing homelessness who died in each month in 2021, as documented in our Dying Homeless Project. We can see here the pattern of deaths actually shows higher numbers of deaths in the summer, contrary to common beliefs that many people die in the winter months.(9)

FINDINGS - EXTREME HEAT

Only half of the councils we contacted responded to extreme heat during the two years. In 2021, the Met Office began to issue extreme heat warnings and in 2022 the UK saw a fierce heatwave with temperatures reaching 40 degrees on 18th and 19th July 2022. In London and many other cities, SWEP was not activated during this heatwave.



Dr Mariam Zachariah notes that the UK is particularly vulnerable to risk to life from heatwaves because our infrastructure is not built for them.

“Our lifestyle and infrastructure are not designed for prolonged exposure to such temperatures. For example, the railway tracks buckle in the extreme heat. These impacts are becoming more and more profound even with seemingly small increases in temperature.” (10)

This is reflected in homelessness systems. Whilst half of councils do take some measures, there is no set protocol, no duty to do so and no-one really knows how best to respond. The GLA have informed us they are creating a proper SWEP protocol and guidance for Summer 2023.

**ON 18TH AND 19TH
JULY 2022,
TEMPERATURES
REACHED 40°C.
IN LONDON AND
MANY OTHER
CITIES, SWEP WAS
NOT ACTIVATED.**

FINDINGS - EXTREME HEAT

The majority of local authorities who operated an extreme heat response offered street level assistance. The offer was largely water, sunscreen, advice. A few local authority outreach teams had health inclusion professionals with them. Some local authorities made cooling spaces available.

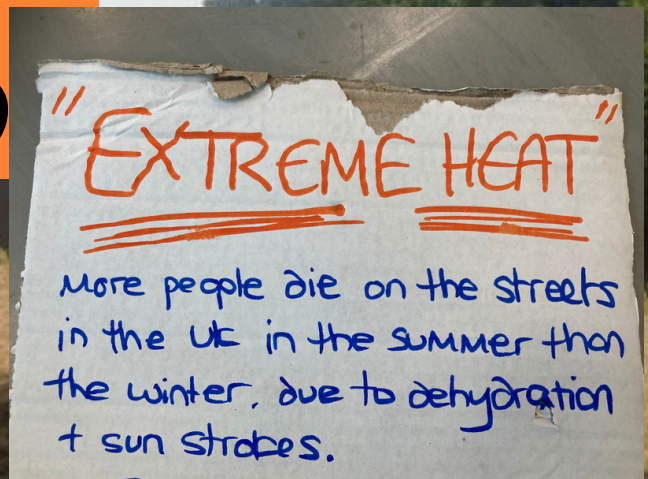
We note that Swindon offered ice lollies and electrolytes. Westminster council was the only local authority to have provision for streetdogs written into it's processes. In our own response to the heatwaves we have been unsure exactly what's best to offer/organise. In our own work on the streets during the heatwave we identified people who were trafficked and begging as most vulnerable and requiring check ins and supplies.

As part of this investigation we asked people experiencing homelessness what is best. People felt they may not want to disrupt their day to enter a cooling space, but that practical items to manage the heat like hats, water and suncream were welcome.

**SWINDON
OFFERED
ELECTROLYTES
AND ICE LOLLIES**

**WESTMINSTER
MADE
PROVISION FOR
STREET DOGS**

“ It would be useful to have a **central point** where we could go and collect what we need. ”



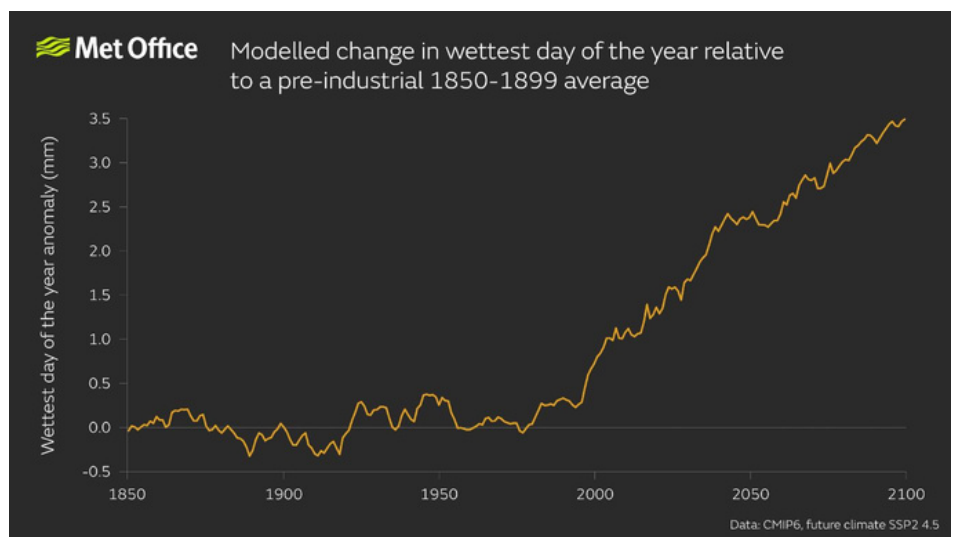
FINDINGS - EXTREME RAIN

People experiencing homelessness have consistently told us that rain is one of the most difficult things to deal with when sleeping on the streets. Despite this, no councils are currently mitigating for the increased rainfall we are seeing in the UK.

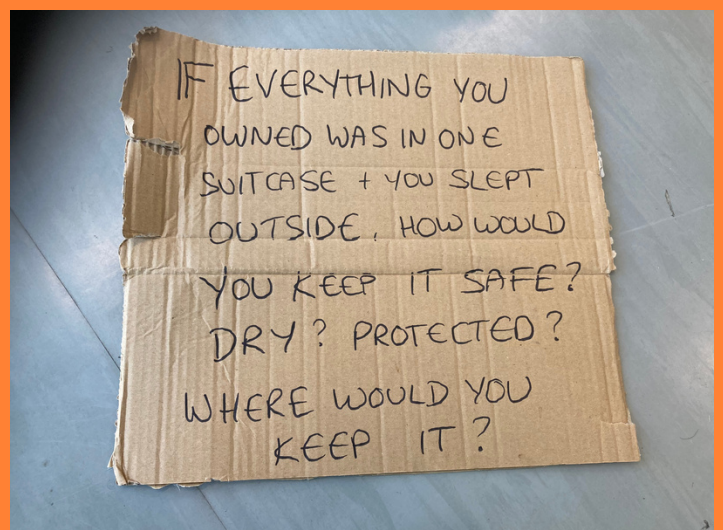
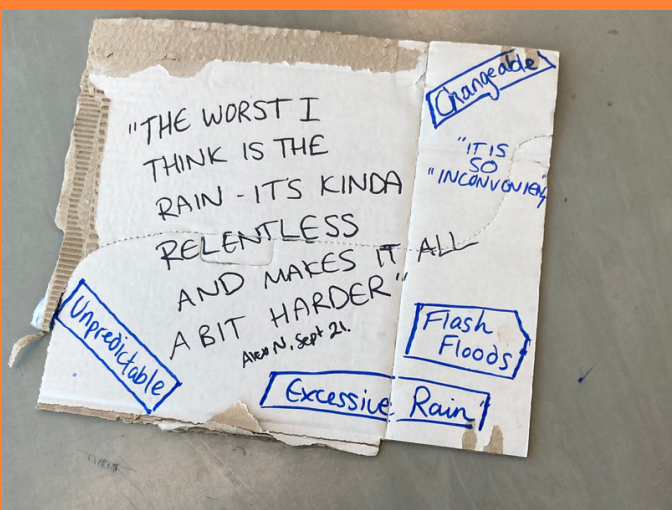
0%

of councils offer SWEP in extreme rain

We were unable to find any examples of measures in place for flash flooding or heavy rainfall. This is despite increases in extreme rain, a trend that is likely to continue.



(11)



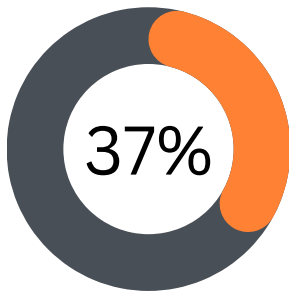
These testimonies were gathered by Street Storage and displayed as part of an exhibition on climate change organised in partnership with Somers Town Community Association and The Living Centre, November 2021

BARRIERS & COMMS

This section examines how councils communicate both internally and externally and the examines feedback we gathered on the tools and processes councils use to implement SWEP. We noted a number of areas where councils could be more robust, consistent and clear with their SWEP messaging. We undertook a systematic review of council websites for this.

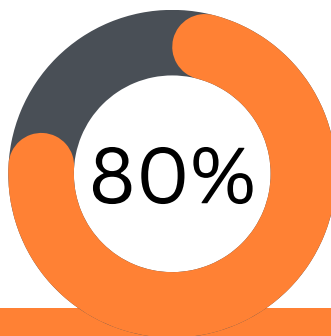
We evaluated all Local Authority mentions of SWEP in their external communications to better understand how councils communicate that there is a protocol and what it means for people sleeping outdoors.

Over a third of all councils don't mention SWEP at all (37%), and others either mention it in the form of an occasional news post. Some councils (39%) have dedicated pages and very few mention hot weather.



of councils do not mention SWEP on their websites

do not communicate anything about extreme heat on their websites



PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

The alert system for SWEP was deemed problematic. A number of London councils did not record data and simply directed us to the GLA for more information.

The alert system is experienced as exclusionary making it hard for grassroots groups who are in touch with people excluded from services to make referrals and also leaving many groups out.

Not following a SWEP system or not recording info A number of councils, with the majority outside London, made alternative provision making SWEP impossible to track.

BARRIERS & COMMS

Verification:

Slow and inefficient response times to Streetlink referrals were highlighted, South Norwood Community Kitchen have included an open letter as part of their consultation with us (published as an appendix). Their points are supported by research. In 2020, Groundswell published a peer led study in Hammersmith and Fulham citing similar concerns: "The key themes in terms of negative feedback was that the Outreach teams were too few in number and that response times (to Streetlink calls) were often slow." (12) We note the funding gaps from 2010 onwards have impacted outreach resourcing significantly. This needs to change.

Conditionality:

Members of the Outside Project team in trying to access SWEP were told that there were "exceptions and limitations" to SWEP when advocating for a person seeking asylum. This indicates ongoing 'in for good' principles are ultimately still leaving out a significant rough sleeping population. Other barriers we identified were 'conditionality' where people who are not 'verified rough sleepers' on the CHAIN database are blocked from accessing SWEP.

**THERE ARE
'EXCEPTIONS
AND
LIMITATIONS'
TO SWEP
WHEN
ADVOCATING
FOR A PERSON
SEEKING
ASYLUM**

“At South Norwood Community Kitchen we support people who come to us wanting to get off the streets by meeting their basic needs (food, clothes, sleeping bag, etc) and doing our best to get them linked in with homelessness services that can provide them with accommodation. This is never, ever an easy task. This winter, time and time again we have struggled to navigate both Street Link and SWEP in order to 'prevent the deaths of people sleeping rough'. This winter, a 70 year old vulnerable man was left to sleep outside for 6 nights and a couple new to the streets forced to squat a garage for 3 nights in the snow. We did everything we could to get them inside during that time, to no avail

South Norwood Community Kitchen

BARRIERS AND COMMS

The verification system and using Streetlink as a centralised communication channel can create significant risk to vulnerable people. One example is as follows. On the evening of 22.12.2020, during the winter lockdown, members of Museum of Homelessness team were doing hot drinks in Westminster when people on the streets alerted us to a woman who was on her first night on the streets. They were concerned because she was highly vulnerable and was already being targeted by a potential perpetrator. This person, a man, was trying to take the woman back to his flat. We de-escalated the situation and we took her (on her request) to Charing Cross police station lobby for safety whilst we tried to refer her in via Streetlink channels. Streetlink eventually replied that outreach were unable to go into a police station to collect someone, detailed below. This is a totally inappropriate rule based upon the fact that outreach have to see someone lying in their sleepsites to verify them.

We put the woman into a hotel and referred her to Crisis at Christmas afterwards, but had we not been there she could have been hurt, assaulted or killed. The current system puts lives at risk

Hi 

Thank you for taking the time to contact StreetLink about the person you are concerned is rough sleeping in Westminster City Council.

At StreetLink we pass on the location of where people are sleeping rough to local outreach teams who then usually go out late at night or early hours of the morning to try and look for people. With that in mind we need to know the exact location of where people have been seen sleeping.

Unfortunately the Outreach teams are unable to go inside a police station. As a result we are unable to process this alert.

If you see the individual again and feel comfortable speaking to them, you could ask them where it is they go to sleep at night, or pass our number on for them to get in touch directly.

In addition, if you feel comfortable doing so you can signpost them to their local homeless support service by searching for services in your area on the Homeless Link website: <https://homeless.org.uk/search-homelessness-services>.

Once again, thank you for contacting StreetLink.

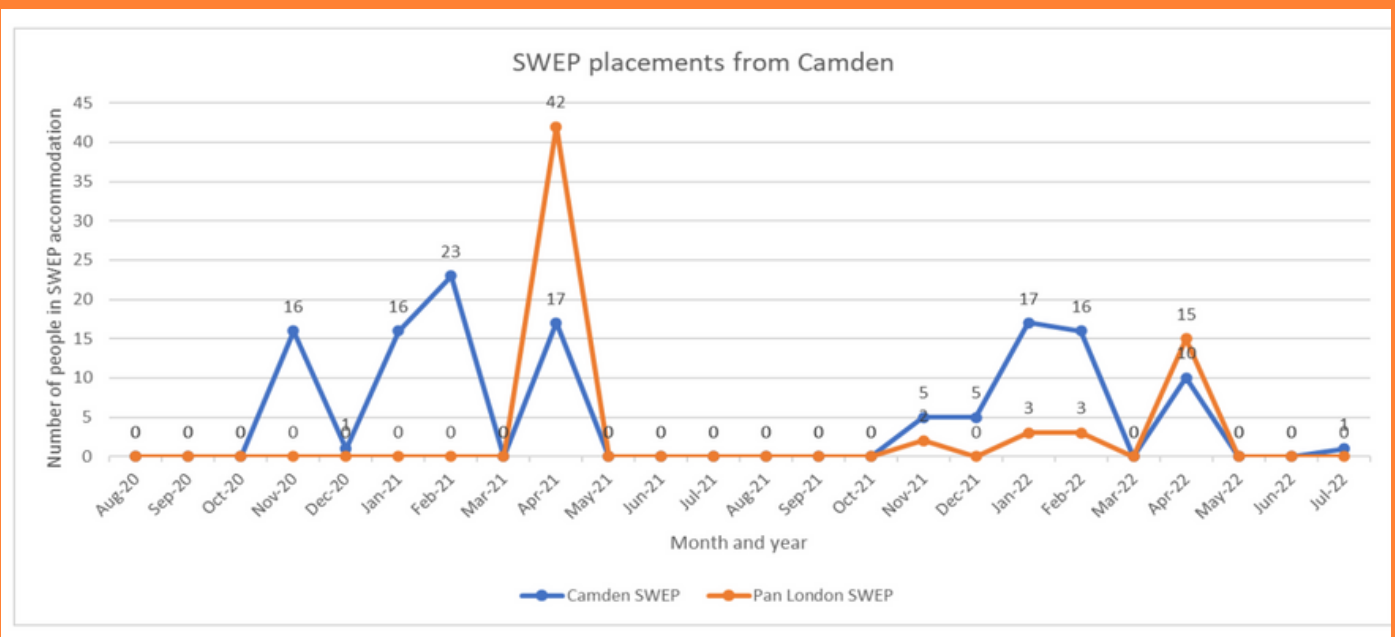
BARRIERS & COMMS

In London, conditionality presents a serious issue. SWEP protocols that we saw demonstrated in particular that the GLA pan London SWEP is limited to people who are verified on the CHAIN database. This excludes people who are more vulnerable and marginalised. We can see from Camden's response that the pan London SWEP is used by boroughs and therefore people are being systematically excluded from life saving provision. Other evidence showed questions around people being 'genuine' rough sleepers.

Pan London SWEP:
 GLA commissioned pan London SWEP is provided by St Mungos. St Mungo's coordinate access to a hotel provision that is set up when the temperature reaches the trigger point. Pan London SWEP is accessed via Croydon Reach when Croydon has reached capacity with its local SWEP offers and is also limited to verified rough sleepers. Croydon Reach will accompany clients to the shelter if possible. **Offers will be made by Croydon Reach after an individual has been identified as suitable and meets the criteria. Out of hours offers will be made by Croydon Reach.**

3.2. Eligibility for SWEP

- 3.2.1. All persons who are considered by Encompass LATC / Emergency Duty Team to be genuinely rough sleeping within the London Borough of Sutton will be eligible for SWEP.
- 3.2.2. The statutory criteria for homelessness assistance set out in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 does NOT apply in the event of SWEP.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- SWEP needs to be made a statutory duty and in the meantime, consistent and agreed practice should be implemented at local government level.
 - Agreed practice should provide support for longer than one night or a couple of nights.
 - The In For Good principle should be applied broadly.
 - SWEP must be unconditional.
 - SWEP offer should be trauma informed.
 - We recommend co-production at a local level to ensure that the offers are safe for people.
-
- SWEP should be included in all climate mitigation plans by central and local government.
 - SWEP must be formally expanded to include heatwaves and extreme rainfall.
 - Local climate taskforces should be created to find out what people experiencing homelessness need in extreme weather events and SWEP designed on the basis of that.
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- Grassroots groups should be included in SWEP communications, delivery and roll out.
 - The verification system, where people must be seen bedding down to be supported, must be abolished.
 - Streetlink should be independently reviewed (again) and measures taken to improve outreach response times, including better resourcing from central government.

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ADDENDUM

Open Letter from South
Norwood Community Kitchen

We are writing this letter to highlight the potentially deadly experience of street homeless people who are waiting for verification, particularly during times of extreme weather, and provide alternatives.



As I'm sure you're aware, no homeless person can be given a safe and warm place to sleep unless they have been 'verified'. This involves a homeless outreach worker physically seeing you 'bedded down' (ie in some kind of makeshift bed on the street) and therefore proving that you are sleeping rough as you say you are. No one except a member of the homelessness outreach team can verify you as being street homeless. At best it can take days for outreach workers to go and 'verify' someone sleeping rough, and at worst it never happens.

The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is an 'emergency response to prevent the deaths of people sleeping rough during winter'. It is designed to get people off the streets while the weather is cold enough to be a threat to life. If you're new to the streets though, what's stopping you from freezing to death is luck, not SWEP. That's because even though it's cold enough for you to die if you sleep outside all night, you still have to be proved to be homeless, by someone seeing you sleeping outside.

Telling someone who sleeps on the streets that they have to keep sleeping on the streets until some random person with a name badge turns up in the middle of the night to 'verify you' is bad enough. Telling that to someone when it is minus temperatures, or snowing, is inhumane. The sickest thing is, as a concerned community member, you can't even let them sleep on your sofa, have a shower, pay for them to stay in a hotel for a night, because they will miss the mysterious and elusive visit from an outreach worker that could literally happen at any moment over multiple days, to a specific spot you've said you are sleeping at. Draconian is an understatement.

SWEP being activated itself is an acknowledgement that conditions are cold enough to be a threat to life, and yet the requirement for verification even in these conditions still exists.



ADDENDUM

Open Letter from South Norwood Community Kitchen



Many people in our community are street homeless, or have experienced street homelessness. At South Norwood Community Kitchen we support people who come to us wanting to get off the streets by meeting their basic needs (food, clothes, sleeping bag, etc) and doing our best to get them linked in with homelessness services that can provide them with accommodation. This is never, ever an easy task. This winter, time and time again we have struggled to navigate both Street Link and SWEP in order to ‘prevent the deaths of people sleeping rough’. This winter, a 70 year old vulnerable man was left to sleep outside for 6 nights and a couple new to the streets forced to squat a garage for 3 nights in the snow. We did everything we could to get them inside during that time, to no avail.

We are calling for an end to the pointless verification process, particularly when SWEP is activated. Going into Spring does not mean this problem gets left till next winter. It’s a chance to work with the community to improve the system and stop people freezing to death on the streets of Croydon. Community organisations like charities, faith organisations and community projects who all work directly with people sleeping on the streets should be able to verify someone as rough sleeping, without the need for an outreach worker to do so via the convoluted verification process.

The current system is costing lives, unnecessary suffering and leaving support agencies frustrated and powerless in being able to save our vulnerable rough sleepers from freezing to death. A drastic change in how rough sleeping referrals are made and handled needs to be put in place before any more of our community suffer.



Severe Weather Emergency was a six month investigation by Museum of Homelessness, culminating in the publication of this report on 29th March 2023. The launch of the report was covered by Open Democracy. Museum of Homelessness will continue to campaign and programme around homelessness and climate mitigation in the months and years to come, as part of our work to fight injustice.

INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS CARRIED OUT BY MATT TURTLE & JESS TURTLE PUBLICATION CREATED BY JESS TURTLE

Gratitude to our Homeless Taskforce partners Streets Kitchen, The Outside Project, Simon Community and Street Storage. The Homeless Taskforce was instrumental in making this investigation happen and has long monitored and raised alarm about the inconsistency of SWEP, which led to this investigation.

Thanks also to colleagues at Open Democracy for featuring the research, Housing Action Teeside Renters Union and South Norwood Community Kitchen for contributing case studies to the project and for their tireless work in solidarity with their communities.



Covid-19 Homeless Taskforce, set up in March 2020 as an emergency response to the crisis homeless communities faced during the pandemic. It consists of five organisations which pooled their extensive knowledge and existing resources to support street homeless and precariously housed communities in London throughout the pandemic. The work continues as our communities face ongoing crisis.