

SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE OFF THE STREET

Many people ask us about what support is available for rough sleepers in Westminster. Here we offer a short guide and information outlining what the challenges are, what the Council is doing and also how the public can help.

Understanding Homelessness

Why is homelessness such an issue in Westminster?

Many people find themselves homeless in Westminster for a variety of reasons. A number arrive from overseas hoping to find work and a place to live without arranging anything before they travel. Others find themselves on the streets due to relationship breakdowns or having lost their job, meaning they can no longer afford to pay their rent or mortgage. A significant number will be suffering from a range of conditions, including mental health, drug and alcohol addiction.

The vast majority of those who find themselves homeless in Westminster have no connection to the City of Westminster. On the latest street count, which totals 235 people only 32% were UK and Irish nationals – with the rest being from abroad. Traditionally, less than 1% of new rough sleepers have a connection to Westminster.

What is the Council's programme to help the homeless?

For many years, the Council has had an overarching policy that no one should have to spend a second night on the street. You can find out more via the Council's website at www.westm.news/HomelessnessStrategy

When the Council was Conservative-run, various services were enacted to help achieve this aim. Most of these measures remain in place. They include outreach teams who are active 365 days and nights a year; collaborations with local charities, and a network of hostels. The Council also provides ongoing help and support once people are off the streets and housed, such as

managing a budget and developing new employment skills.

What is Westminster Council's legal duty?

Whilst the Council only has a direct responsibility to people who have a connection to Westminster, the vast majority of people helped are from outside the Council area. The Council works with other London Boroughs, referring people to hubs and providing short-term accommodation and food. Where possible, the Council will look to reconnect rough sleepers with their original community, family and friends.

What is being done to improve the situation?

Currently, over £10 million a year is being spent on homelessness. These funds, which are predominantly provided for by the government, cover the cost of outreach workers, hostels, night shelters and rehabilitation support.

A new "EAT" team has been mentioned, which sees a multi-service group (including charities, the police and Council officers) work in a coordinated way. We are, however, disappointed the successful "buddy team" launched under the Conservatives hasn't been continued. This programme saw ex-rough sleepers accompanying Council officers in their efforts to encourage people to come off the streets and into care pathways.

The Council works closely with three charities; St Mungo's, The Passage and The Connection at St Martin's.

How many hostel or night shelter beds are there, and what powers does the Council have to take people into these?

The Council commissions a wide range of specialist-supported housing for people with different needs. There are over 400 bed spaces specifically for individuals with a rough sleeping history.

The Council cannot force someone inside as it is not illegal to sleep rough. The outreach teams do their very best to gain the trust of those sleeping on the streets. It can however take weeks, and often months, to build up trust with people who, from their life experiences, may be very damaged and have a tendency to mistrust others.

How effective has the Council's strategy been?

Historically the Council sees about 400-500 new homeless people reach the City's streets each quarter. Records show that almost all of these people are helped or reconnected with family.

Please be aware that beggars (often trafficked by criminal gangs) will appear to be rough sleepers and ask for donations. Whilst it's a tragic situation, these people typically have places to sleep and therefore are not technically classified as rough sleepers. Their presence will give the impression that there are more rough sleepers than there are in practice

If the weather is really hot or cold, are there more beds available?

Yes. If the temperature reaches zero degrees or above 30 degrees, a "Severe Weather Protocol" is triggered. This immediately creates an extra 100 beds and food for those sleeping on the streets. However, experience shows there are still a number of people who will refuse shelter even in the most severe weather conditions.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS?

Should I give money to a homeless person?

Much as it's heartbreaking, the official advice from homelessness experts and charities is not to give funds directly to rough sleepers. This advice is based on decades of experience of working with those on the streets.

The money raised from begging often goes towards buying drugs and alcohol rather than food and drink. It, therefore, further entrenches people's lives on the streets rather than persuading them to seek the help and support they need. There is also often an element of organised crime and human trafficking behind begging. The money given therefore does not often go to the beggars themselves but can go to crime barons instead.

If I want to donate funds, what is the safest way to do so?

When the Conservatives ran the council, residents were able to text a number and amount, which sent funds directly to the homelessness charity partners. Unfortunately,

that facility is no longer operational. We, therefore, suggest donating directly to StreetLink through their JustGiving page here: www.justgiving.com/streetlink

If I am worried about a homeless person, what should I do?

Please either contact your local Councillors or notify the Council outreach teams through StreetLink at www.streetlink.London. You will be asked for details on the individual you are concerned about, and the outreach workers will seek to contact them. If you think the person you are concerned about is in immediate danger or needs urgent care, please call 999.

If I would like to help the situation, where can I volunteer?

Please contact the three charity partners the Council works with - St Mungo's, The Passage and The Connection at St Martin's - should you kindly wish to volunteer in Westminster.

Aside from these partners, there are other smaller homeless charities in various neighbourhoods across Westminster. Please contact your Councillors should you wish to learn more about these organisations.

What about tents on the streets?

Tents are often donated to rough sleepers. Whilst this technically can provide shelter to the persons concerned, tents do cause problems for the police, outreach officers and charity workers. This is because tents require court orders to be moved and will often require warrants before an official can enter. Tents may often entrench rough sleepers and prevent engagement with outreach workers.