



Rural homelessness counts – a call to action

New research has shown that homelessness in rural communities represents a real and growing crisis. There has been a 24% rise in levels of rough sleeping in rural areas in just one year, as the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite, and housing unaffordability makes finding and keeping a safe place to stay out of reach.

The report *Homelessness in the Countryside: A Hidden Crisis* by academics at the University of Kent and the University of Southampton, shows how rural homelessness is often out of sight, out of mind, **hidden and overlooked by national and local policy**. This results in a **lack of vital services and support** for those in need.

The shame and stigma associated with homelessness in prosperous areas is a significant barrier to getting support. What is more, the research found that 83% of frontline workers in rural areas think that addressing homelessness has become harder in the past five years.

The research found that the causes of homelessness in rural areas are similar to those in urban areas, but are impacted by **isolation, the absence of support services and limited transportation options**. Insufficient funding in rural areas often pushes people to urban centres. It is in every community's interest that rural homelessness is prevented and tackled wherever it occurs.

The research was carried out on behalf of our coalition of housing associations, homelessness and rural charities. We believe its findings show that this issue must no longer be ignored and are calling on local and national leaders to come together to say that **'rural homelessness counts.'**

"There are more places to sleep in tents, cars, and vans. We get a lot of people who do not realise they are rough sleeping...People are also much more removed from services by geography. There is a lack of knowledge about what services are where, what they do and how to access them. As a result, more people develop multiple and complex needs, fall victim to gate keeping, and their situations become more entrenched" – survey respondent

What changes need to be made at the national level?

- **The Prime Minister and all-party leaders must make a commitment to ending homelessness and ensuring future strategies are rural-proofed:** rural homelessness is not inevitable. The Prime Minister and Cabinet Office should establish a cross-government commitment to end homelessness across the board, including a focus on ending rural homelessness and other 'hidden' forms. To be true to a 'prevention-first' approach, future strategies should go beyond just rough sleeping, and be 'rural-proofed' to ensure they deliver for rural communities.

- **DLUHC must improve processes for better counting and funding efforts to tackle rural homelessness:** preventative strategies need accurate data. The rough sleeping snapshot, while providing useful insight, does not capture 'hidden' forms of homelessness and in many rural areas is an estimate rather than a meaningful count. This can result in lower funding allocations through the Rough Sleepers Initiative. DLUHC should provide dedicated support for rural local authorities to make effective use of the dashboard developed by the Centre for Homelessness Impact and increase baseline funding for homelessness services in rural areas and across the board.
- **DLUHC should work with select local authorities to pilot and evaluate a one-stop shop model for homeless outreach and support in rural areas:** these services should provide multidisciplinary support across a breadth of areas, to support mental health, substance use, and housing casework, combined with an established fund to cover the transport costs of service users. This should not be tied to a 'bricks and mortar' service but allow workers the flexibility to cover larger geographic areas and provide person-centred support where people are.
- **Central government should provide investment to build more social housing and raise Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to cover the cost of rent:** rural areas have received lower levels of the government's discretionary funding to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, while preventative measures such as welfare entitlements and social housing have been squeezed for at-risk rural residents. To support rural and urban areas alike, LHA rates should be re-established at the 30th percentile, and the Affordable Homes Programme should be expanded to meet the scale of the problem. This should include a higher proportion of homes for social rent, with a rural investment target of at least 12% of all funding.

What changes need to be made at the local level?

- **Rural local authorities should expand efforts to count and deliver needs-based responses to homelessness in their communities:** authorities should conduct full counts of people sleeping rough in their annual snapshots, and regularly use the new dashboard developed by the Centre for Homelessness Impact in their homelessness strategies. This should inform the delivery affordable housing and the commissioning of support services to help people find and sustain tenancies.
- **Rural local authorities should establish homelessness reduction boards to create joined-up systems and channel community goodwill:** because rural homelessness is often less visible, rural areas are less likely to have developed systems in place to end it. Local authorities should consider the creation of boards to drive forward their homelessness strategy, bringing together different agencies to improve service co-ordination. These boards should bring together partners in housing, transport, healthcare, and voluntary groups, which can be particularly important in isolated rural areas where existing homelessness services may be lacking. Boards should develop partnership working arrangements with nearby district councils, upper tier, and unitary authorities alike, and explore joint commissioning to deliver responses that best meet need.