Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023 Report

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

Women are significantly underrepresented in rough sleeping statistics. This impacts funding for female-only housing options resulting in many women being forced into sleep rough or stay in unsafe accommodation.

By working collaboratively with key and trusted partners in the homelessness and women's sector we have evidenced the scale of the challenges faced by women experiencing homelessness across the country.

The findings from the women's rough sleeping census highlight the need for the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities to act now: bringing about systemic change to homelessness interventions with women who are sleeping rough. The census has demonstrated how crucial a dedicated resource within government to respond to women's homelessness is if we are to work towards ending rough sleeping in England.

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Executive summary

The UK Government defined rough sleeping in 2010 to facilitate local authorities conducting counts and estimates. In 2016 rough sleeping counts began to report gender breakdowns, suggesting – both for London and nationally – that women constitute on average around 15% of those sleeping rough.[1] However, other empirical research, accounts from women with lived experience of rough sleeping and reports from frontline services have all suggested that women are underrepresented in the yearly snapshot counts and estimates.[2] The predominant reason for this is that due to constant fear of violence and/or abuse, women often sleep rough in ways which mean they are less likely to be seen 'bedded down or about to bed down' than their male peers.[3] This lack of visibility can result in women who sleep rough being less able to access services and accommodation, as many local authorities require people to be 'verified' as sleeping rough[4] in order to access support.

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census was developed in 2022 in response to these barriers. In its second iteration in 2023, it has continued to demonstrate that current estimates of women's rough sleeping numbers are much too low, and that women's experiences of rough sleeping are not being provided for by current policies, strategies, funding models, definitions and practices.

This report finds that the census is necessary to improve the accuracy of estimating the scale of women's rough sleeping and present a more comprehensive data picture than that which exists currently. In addition, the census provides an important focus for strengthening working links across all sectors to support women experiencing and at risk of rough sleeping.

In the months since the census was completed, the participating local authorities have already enacted a wide range of changes to improve their responses to women's rough sleeping. The findings from the census can illustrate patterns of women's rough sleeping and underline experiences of women which have numerous implications for the ways in which practice can be adapted and improved to support women, ultimately having important implications for measures to end rough sleeping for women.

Women are not the only group underserved by current data collection and one-size-fits-all strategies, approaches and services. This is evident in the work undertaken by the Rural Homelessness Counts Coalition, and for other underserved groups such as marginalised ethnicities, young people, LGBTQ+ people and migrants, (many of whom will also be women). Lessons from the census are therefore valuable in their implications for improved support for women, but also in the learning that can be applied to developing effective solutions to counting, preventing and ending rough sleeping for everyone. An approach which acknowledges diversity of need and experience will be much more effective for ending rough sleeping for all those who experience it.

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[1] DLUHC (2024) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2023*. Official Statistics. Published 29 February 2024. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2023 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).
DLUHC (2023) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022*. Official Statistics. Published 28 February 2023. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).
[2] Bretherton J. and Maycock P. (2021) Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review. Brussels: FEANTSA
[3] Bretherton J. and Pleace N. (2018) Women and rough sleeping. York: University of York.
Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse and St Mungo's, (2021) Safety by Experience: Women's experiences. London: Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse.
[4] By being seen 'bedded down or about to bed down' by outreach workers.

Census design

A coalition of organisations and researchers drew on existing research, accounts of women with lived experience of rough sleeping and input from frontline services to create an approach tailored to the behaviours of women who sleep rough. The 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census involved:

- Outreach teams and other cross sector services undertaking a brief survey with women they encountered who identified as having rough slept in the last 3 months. The census took place over a 7-day period, with recommendations that outreach teams implemented 'gender-informed' outreach shifts[5] to find women who may not otherwise be identified.
- Following census week, local authorities were asked to undertake census data review meetings. These involved cross-sector services coming together to share data on the numbers of women they knew to have slept rough within the previous three months. This was followed by a discussion about local key challenges in supporting women who sleep rough.

The 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census took place across England between Monday 25th September and Sunday 1st October 2023. 27 London boroughs and 14 other local authorities submitted survey responses. 17 London boroughs and five other local authorities participated in the additional census data review meetings.

Key findings from the 2023 census

- 815 survey responses were received in total. 391 survey responses were received from London alone – representing over double the figure from the 2022 pilot census (154 survey responses). This is likely to be due to increased familiarity with the census, with many boroughs completing it for the second time, and a higher level of engagement from services in census activities. This substantial increase in survey responses may also reflect growth in women's rough sleeping in London between 2022 and 2023.
- 838 known women were counted in the data meetings across 22 local authorities, and 212 additional women were noted as being known to services, but insufficient details were available to authenticate them.[6]
- Women reported sleeping rough/sheltering overnight in a variety of 'hidden' locations including A&E waiting rooms, on buses or trains, in squats, and in many other locations where they are unlikely to be identified by outreach workers tasked with verifying and supporting people sleeping rough.
- Women reported transient and intermittent rough sleeping patterns, meaning they are less likely to be identified by outreach workers tasked with verifying and supporting people sleeping rough (i.e. because they spend nights walking around rather than 'bedding down').
- A third of respondents (33.4%; 271 women) reported that they had been in some form of homelessness accommodation prior to rough sleeping. This included council- and

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[5] Gender-informed outreach recognises that women's specific needs are influenced by their gender and that tailored approaches are required to give more responsive, personalised and holistic care.

[6] In London, 656 known women were counted across 17 boroughs, and 193 additional women were noted as known to services.

government-provided homelessness accommodation, and homelessness services such as hostels and refuges. This indicates that for many women, the accommodation offered to them is not resolving their homelessness, as it is either unsuitable for their needs or they have been unable to sustain it.

- Rough sleeping thus often forms part of a trajectory of women's homelessness, revealing that preventative work is needed to resolve women's homelessness before they resort to rough sleeping.

Emerging themes

Current identification and verification methods exclude many women who sleep rough

This 2023 census provides data from over 800 women across England describing their recent experiences of rough sleeping. As with the 2022 London census, this reveals that women's experiences of rough sleeping tend to be hidden, transient and intermittent, and that both the locations and the ways in which women sleep rough frequently fall outside of the Government definition of rough sleeping. This means that they are highly likely to be missed in the current snapshot counts used to enumerate rough sleeping. It also suggests that many women across England will not be identified as rough sleeping during normal outreach work, meaning that they are less likely to access current targeted support and accommodation pathways.

Verification requirements and practices vary, with some local authorities or regions strictly adhering to the Government definition in order to 'verify' rough sleepers, and some being able to apply some flexibility to 'get around' these system barriers. As the 2022 Kerslake report noted, "A significant barrier to delivering rough sleeping prevention is the need for verification".[7] This came through from the census as well, with several London boroughs who undertook data meetings reporting that having to 'verify' that people are sleeping rough according to the current definition (those bedded down or about to bed down in certain locations) posed challenges for identifying and supporting women who are sleeping rough.

To overcome this challenge, it is recommended that all local authorities adopt an inclusive and gender-informed definition of rough sleeping, enabling outreach teams to 'verify' that women are sleeping rough according to their local knowledge, professional experience and, most significantly, the accounts of women themselves. It is also recommended that outreach teams are able to 'verify' and support women who are sleeping rough using intelligence from local specialist services who support women who sleep rough, such as women's services. A small number of London boroughs are beginning to pilot this approach to verification, following their involvement in the census.

Women's homelessness is not being resolved by current approaches / resources

A significant number of women who took part in the 2023 census reported that they had been experiencing homelessness in another form prior to rough sleeping, and a third (33.4%)

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[7] The Kerslake Commission on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping (2022). https://usercontent.one/wp/www.commissiononroughsleeping.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/KRSC_Progress_Report_0922a.pdf

of women reported that they had been in some form of homelessness accommodation prior to rough sleeping. This is of considerable concern, as it demonstrates that the accommodation offered to women to resolve their homelessness is either not sustainable (and they are forced to return to rough sleeping) or not suitable for their needs (so they return to rough sleeping rather than using the accommodation offered). Additionally, many local authorities that took part in the data meetings reported that accommodation options for women were often not deemed safe by women, were not specialist or able to respond to effectively to women's needs, or were unsuitable for other reasons, for example the widespread lack of accommodation for couples who are rough sleeping.

Recommendations

This census has resulted in numerous recommendations that further work be undertaken to understand women's trajectories through homelessness and ensure that provision for women experiencing rough sleeping can more effectively meet their needs and resolve their homelessness. The complete set of recommendations are contained in the full report. However, in brief, responses to women's rough sleeping need to include:

1. Government leadership of the Women's Rough Sleeping Census, supporting all local authorities to complete an annual women's census.
2. Dedicated functions, resources and strategic focus on women's rough sleeping within the government rough sleeping department, including a refreshed and gender-informed strategy, definition and guidance documents.
3. Cross-departmental strategies at a government and local level, recognising that women experiencing rough sleeping are impacted by a range of needs including severe VAWG and health concerns and immigration restrictions, and that rough sleeping cannot be resolved by the homelessness sector in isolation.
4. Improved gender-informed practices to support services to better reach women, including gender-informed adaptations to regular outreach practices, a 'no wrong door' approach, removal of the need for 'verification' of rough sleeping, women's specialist roles, and improved understanding of women's rough sleeping at strategic and service delivery levels.
5. Urgent attendance to the safety of services, whether women-only or mixed, and ensuring existing and new services are both effective and safe for women.
6. Identification of preventative solutions which recognise a gradual deterioration into rough sleeping for women, and identification of effective responses for women who are regularly sleeping rough to enable them to successfully move away from rough sleeping and revolving-door homelessness.

Contents

1. Introduction

Although data are collected annually to estimate the number of people who sleep rough across the UK, women are underrepresented in this research – despite being some of the most vulnerable individuals within the rough sleeping population. Current data sources used to understand rough sleeping come from recording practices which are not adapted to women's patterns of this type of homelessness. Service commissioning that is reliant on this data will not be able to meet the needs of the women whose experiences are not being collected.

This census[8] therefore aims to bring visibility to the experiences of women who are rough sleeping and who are not currently represented in data, policy or service provision. By using methods which consider gender-based experiences, this research aimed to:

- Build more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping through the collection of anonymised data;
- Support services to forge links, share good practice and consider developing joined-up support for women who are rough sleeping; and
- Challenge systemic practices which mean that women have traditionally been undercounted.

We hope that these findings will be used to advocate for targeted support for women who sleep rough and inform policy, commissioning and practice.

This report presents findings from the second Women's Rough Sleeping Census conducted between 25th September and 1st October 2023. It builds upon the findings from the census conducted in 2022[9] (Young and Hodges, 2022), adding further insight about the characteristics and circumstances of the women who participated in the census. Commencing with a description of the methods employed, we present the census findings and review its implementation, before making recommendations about future research – keeping in mind the current resource limitations inherent in this work.

Unlike the initial 2022 census that took place solely across London boroughs, this second census also included 14 local authority areas across England. Solace, Single Homeless Project (SHP), London Councils and the Greater London Authority (GLA) refined the methods originally developed by the coalition of organisations that delivered the first census (Solace, SHP, The Connection at St Martin's, St Mungo's, London Councils and the GLA, with support from researchers at PraxisCollab[10]). Solace and Homeless Link then oversaw it being taken beyond London – coordinating both data collection and its collation. Analysis and reporting were undertaken by researchers at Change Grow Live.

1.1 Census design

The census was designed to collect information about women who experience rough sleeping – a very hidden and high-risk form of homelessness. It was also designed for a wide

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[8] Although arguably not a 'census' – the research team acknowledge that this work does not provide a complete enumeration of the women's rough sleeping population for participating areas – we have decided to retain the term 'Women's Rough Sleeping Census' to differentiate this work from other rough sleeping and homeless snapshots.
[9] A census was originally piloted in 2022 by Single Homeless Project, The Women's Development Unit (Solace and The Connection at St Martin's) and St Mungo's with support from London Councils, the GLA and researchers at Praxis Collab. That census involved twenty-one London boroughs and 154 survey responses were received for women reporting sleeping rough within the previous three months. For the second census in 2023 - the national pilot - Homeless Link and Solace also led on engaging areas outside London.
[10] This coalition designed a methodology for surveying women rough sleeping including hidden rough sleeping in London boroughs between the 3rd and 7th October 2022 to provide a snapshot of the numbers of women surveyed during that time.

range of services and sectors to take part, including health, drug and alcohol, violence against women and girls (VAWG), migrant support and community services, in recognition of the fact that women may be known to these kinds of services long before they are identified by homelessness services. Any service supporting women was encouraged to get involved in order to maximise representation of women and reflect the diversity of support services within the field.

The 2023 census had two components:

1/ Census survey
During census week, a short anonymous survey (see Appendix 1) was completed by women who had recently experienced rough sleeping as identified by service representatives. Where possible, outreach teams conducted the survey on gender-informed shifts. In some areas this outreach work was supplemented by services coming together to host women's census sessions in their local authority area (e.g. in day centres or at other key local hotspots).

2/ Data review meetings
After census week, local services were asked to come together in each local authority area to collate basic data about the number of women they work with who are rough sleeping – to help provide an anonymised, representative picture of women rough sleeping in each location.

2. Background context

2.1 Scale of the issue

> *"Funding for women's specialist services is now confined to a few areas in England and much provision under the Rough Sleeping Initiative, and other specific funding programmes to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, continues to be gender-blind."*
>
> Kerslake, 2023 p.61

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) estimated that the number of people sleeping rough in England on one single night in autumn 2022 was 3,069 - up by 626 people (26%) from 2021 and an increase of 74% since 2010 when the snapshot approach was introduced[11]. This suggests a rate of people sleeping rough of 5.4 people per 100,000: an increase since 2021 (4.3 per 100,000). This 2022 snapshot found that men formed the majority of those sleeping rough (2,539 men, 83% of the total), with 464 women identified (15% of the total)[12]. The gender breakdown of people sleeping rough was similar across all regions in England and was also similar to previous years, going back to when data on rough sleeping first started to be captured using snapshot methodology in 2010. This has led to a widespread assumption that the majority of people who sleep rough in England are male.

In February 2024, DLUHC estimated that the number of people sleeping rough in England on one single night in autumn 2023 was 3,898 - up by 829 people (27%) from 2022 and an increase of 120% since 2010[13]. This 2023 snapshot again found that men to be the majority of

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[11] DLUHC (2023) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022.* Official Statistics. Published 28 February 2023. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[12] Gender was 'Not known' for 66 people (2% of the total).
[13] DLUHC (2024) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2023.* Official Statistics. Published 29 February 2024. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2023 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

those sleeping rough (3,214 men, 82% of the total), with 568 women identified (15% of the total)[14]. The gender breakdown remained similar across the regions.

2.2 Gender differences in the experience of rough sleeping

The past few years have seen growing recognition that women who sleep rough often try to make themselves less visible in order to stay safe - by moving at night or concealing themselves or their gender[15]. As rough sleeping rates in England are predominantly measured by street counts - that is, outreach workers undertaking snapshot counts on designated nights of people they can see bedded down or about to bed down - the result is that women's rough sleeping is underrepresented in official statistics, and policy and commissioning insight about women's needs is less well established than for men[16].

Research in Camden to explore the numbers and circumstances of women experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping used a pilot methodology, which did not require women to be seen bedded down or about to bed down, to capture a more accurate picture[17]. The study identified women who had experienced prolonged homelessness and other forms of multiple disadvantage, who were not having their homelessness adequately addressed and who required specialist, women-specific support because mainstream provision was not adequately meeting their needs.

This Camden research inspired development of the first Women's Rough Sleeping Census in 2022, which concluded that: "*Women's experiences of rough sleeping are materially different to men's and that consequently the current systems and processes used by local authorities and central government for establishing rough sleeping among women are not fit for purpose as they are designed for men who are rough sleeping.*" (Young and Hodges 2022; P11[18]).

2.3 Gender differences in the visibility and recording of rough sleeping

Bretherton and Pleace (2021) identify three main challenges in being able to accurately identify the extent of women's homelessness. Firstly, that the current narrow definition of homelessness doesn't fit women's experiences; second, that as a result, women's homelessness is under-recorded, largely because of the third challenge: that the strategies used to identify rough sleepers are not sensitive to gender differences and therefore oversample men[19].

This is of crucial concern. The government's 2022 Rough Sleeping Strategy[20] committed to ending rough sleeping by 2024. While this ambition has not been achieved by the stated deadline, reaching this goal in the future will require central and local government to work collaboratively and innovatively with business, communities, faith and voluntary groups and

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[14] Gender was 'Not known' for 116 people (3% of the total).
[15] Bretherton J. and Pleace N. 2018. Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology. The University of York. Young L. and Hodges K. (2022) Making women count: Designing and conducting a rough sleeping census for women in London. Online: PraxisCollab. www.shp.org.uk/making-women-count-rough-sleeping-census-report
[16] Public Health England. 2020. *Guidance. Health Matters: Rough sleeping* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-rough-sleeping/health-matters-rough-sleeping
[17] Bretherton and Pleace collaborated with Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden (FLIC). See further: Bretherton J. and Pleace N. 2021. *Women's Homelessness in Camden: Improving Data Strategy and Outcomes*. The University of York.
[18] Young L. and Hodges K. (2022) Making women count: Designing and conducting a rough sleeping census for women in London. Online: PraxisCollab. www.shp.org.uk/making-women-count-rough-sleeping-census-report
[19] Bretherton J. and Pleace N. 2021. *Women's Homelessness in Camden: Improving Data Strategy and Outcomes*. The University of York.
[20] DLUHC (2022) *Ending rough sleeping for good*. Policy paper and cross-government strategy. September 2022. ISBN 978-1-5286-3661-2, CP 713. Ending rough sleeping for good - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

the general public. Recognition of the different ways in which women experience rough sleeping and further work to identify the true scale of women's rough sleeping are necessary if the government are to progress towards this aim. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to ensure that homelessness and rough sleeping provision is designed and delivered with women's experiences in mind, so that the services and resources to address this problem are sufficient for the task[21].

2.4 Gender differences in the harms from rough sleeping

The consequences of women's rough sleeping so often remaining undetected and unresolved are severe. As with broader homelessness[22], women who sleep rough are likely to have experienced higher rates of trauma, domestic abuse, mental ill-health and self-harm than their male counterparts[23], highlighting the need for an integrated, cross-sector response at a local authority level, and a cross-departmental commitment to addressing women's rough sleeping from central government[24]. Women who are homeless due to domestic or other abuse continue to be at risk of harm on the street or in public places; they are more likely to flee homelessness accommodation that doesn't feel safe (i.e. mixed hostels where they are known to experience high levels of physical and sexual violence)[25]. Perhaps the most striking evidence about the greater level of harm caused to women by rough sleeping is the gender difference in premature death. Life expectancy for women who sleep rough is 43 years, compared to 45 years for men who sleep rough[26]. In comparison, the average life expectancy for the general population is 83 years for women and 79 years for men[27].

2.5 Defining women's rough sleeping

In 2010, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)[28] defined people who sleep rough as[29]:

1. People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down[30] in the open air (such as on the street, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments).

2. People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or "bashes" which are makeshift shelters often comprised of cardboard boxes).

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[21] The Kerslake Commission on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping. 2021. *A new way of working: ending rough sleeping together.* Final report September 2021. https://www.commissiononroughsleeping.org/2021-report/
[22] Irving A. and Harding J. 2022. *The prevalence of trauma among people who have experienced homelessness in England.* Oasis Community Housing.
[23] Public Health England. 2020. *Guidance. Health Matters: Rough sleeping* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-rough-sleeping/health-matters-rough-sleeping
[24] Ralphs R., Wright S., Cornwall P. and Hanna P. 2022 *The effectiveness of the Manchester Street Engagement Hub.* Research Report, Manchester Metropolitan University.
[25] Bretherton J. and Pleace N. 2018. Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology. The University of York.
[26] Office for National Statistics 2022 *Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2021 registrations* https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations
[27] Office for National Statistics 2021 *National life tables – life expectancy in the UK: 2018 to 2020.* National life tables – life expectancy in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[28] MHCLG no longer exists. In September 2021 it was replaced by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).
[29] Dept for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023) Rough sleeping snapshot in England: Autumn 2022. Official Statistics. Published 28 February 2023. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
See also: Health matters: rough sleeping - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[30] Bedded down is taken to mean either lying down or sleeping.

The definition and related guidance - used for the purpose of rough sleeping snapshot counts, estimates and in some areas to 'verify' that a person is sleeping rough – do not account for women's experiences of rough sleeping in three key ways:

Firstly, the requirement for a person to be seen 'sleeping, about to bed down or actually bedded down' is reliant on a visibility which women who are sleeping rough will often purposefully avoid due to the risk to their personal safety.

Second, the definition does not include indoor spaces where women report they often shelter or sleep for safety reasons – such as A&E departments, fast food restaurants, libraries and other indoor public spaces.

Third, rough sleeping snapshot counts take place at night, which women report is the most dangerous time for them to rough sleep, causing them to walk the streets throughout the night and sleep in the day - when there are more services open and more members of the public around.

It is therefore not surprising that the majority of people seen rough sleeping according to this definition are male – as the definition itself is centred on a predominately male experience of rough sleeping.

This government definition of rough sleeping explicitly excludes people in hostels, shelters, campsites (or other sites used for recreational purposes or organised protest), as well as squatters, gypsies, travellers and Romany communities. It is highlighted in the government guidance that policy, programmes and services need to recognise that rough sleeping can be a transitory state - with many people experiencing a 'revolving door' cycle where they move in and out of short-term accommodation. However, until now there has been no government recognition of the gender differences in rough sleeping, and no consideration of the resulting implications for strategic planning and resource allocation.

Insight from the Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2022 and 2023 Census definition

The London 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 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 changing locations regularly for safety reasons.

Intermittent: Women may sleep rough interspersed with other forms of dangerous hidden homelessness, such as sex working 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.

The 2023 Census therefore defines women's rough sleeping as:

> *Having nowhere safe 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), walking all night, 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.*
>
> *It is recognised that women may not do this every night, and rough sleeping may be interspersed with other forms of hidden homelessness such as staying in accommodation belonging to unsafe/unknown people/perpetrators, staying in 'cuckooed' flats, or staying with friends/family/associates on a very insecure and transitory basis (e.g. nightly or weekly, or regularly being forced to leave immediately).*

3. Research design and methods

Like the 2022 study, the main aims of the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census were to:

- Establish the circumstances and characteristics of women sleeping rough within that timeframe.
- Identify some of the places where women are rough sleeping so that outreach services and other homelessness services can tailor their support to women out of sight of existing services.
- Refine the methods used for surveying women's rough sleeping (including hidden rough sleeping) by sharing the learning from participating local authorities across England.

The census was inclusive of everyone who identifies as a woman and people who identify as non-binary who feel the study's gender themes are relevant to their experiences.

3.1 Development and support

Building on the work undertaken in 2022, members of the census core team in London (Solace, SHP, London Councils and the GLA), developed the methodology for repeat delivery of the census and updated and developed resources, published on the census webpage (Solace Women's Aid, https://www.solacewomensaid.org/london-womens-rough-sleeping-census-2023/).

Following release of and events to launch the 2022 census results and report, a number of further local authorities expressed interest in conducting the census, either by contacting the census core team or via Homeless Link's Women's Housing Movement, which had developed a sub-group to further the work of the census. Homeless Link reached out to additional local authorities, resulting in a range of additional areas taking part including urban areas, rural areas, and counties with a mix of both. Homeless Link and Solace conducted planning meetings, training, and peer support sessions; developed additional resources to support the participating local authorities to deliver the census in their areas; and arranged to collect the resulting data. As part of their preparation, local authorities were

encouraged to seek the input of women with lived experience, for example in identifying hotspot areas for outreach to cover.

In London, members of the census core team (Solace, SHP, London Councils and the GLA) attended a number of rough sleeping focused pan-London and sub regional meetings and forums, to publicise the census and engage local authorities and cross sector services. As well as engaging rough sleeping coordinators and outreach services, the census team made particular efforts to engage services from the VAWG and health sectors, in recognition of the fact that these services often encounter women who are sleeping rough long before they come to the attention of outreach services. In London, the census team developed a new implementation strategy based on learning from the pilot census, whereby each participating local authority identified a Census Lead to steer their local planning and delivery, who was in turn supported by a member of the census core team. Training sessions were hosted in August 2023[31], recordings of which were uploaded to the webpage and the census team was available to provide information and answer questions from teams interested in participating. These resources were also made available to organisers outside of London.

3.2 Implementing the census

The census organisers encouraged every area to plan and conduct gender-informed shifts for the census and requested that everyone have training (or at least read guidance) on gender-informed outreach and conducting the census. All sites ensured that female staff were present on outreach sessions – with one area having only women undertaking the census outreach.

Incentive vouchers were offered to women completing the census survey in many of the participating areas through distribution to participating teams. Most areas provided vouchers with a value of £5, with some areas increasing this to £10, and vouchers were for a range of supermarket, food and retail outlets. Due to the scale of delivery across London boroughs, priority for vouchers was given to outreach teams and planned women's census sessions. In London, the census core team arranged for volunteers to support outreach shifts and women's census sessions where requested: seven London boroughs requested and received volunteers, including for day centres and some health settings.

The London boroughs were all asked to complete a minimum of six hours of census outreach – although some conducted more. Across the other areas, the amount of time devoted to outreach varied between 12 and 49 hours (mean=25 hours)[32].

3.3 Agencies involved in the census

The London boroughs primarily implemented the census through their rough sleeping leads, with commissioned outreach teams playing a primary role – although one borough's census participation was led by their drug and alcohol team. The census team relied on and encouraged the lead in each local authority (usually rough sleeping leads) to bring in as many other local teams as possible, while the core team reached out to a range of sectors across London through attending sector meetings and via a census mailing list.

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[31] 120 people attended the live training sessions - a substantial increase in engagement from the 2022 census.
[32] The numbers of staff involved in the census was not gathered for London. Descriptions about the numbers of staff involved in the census in other areas varied from a per shift answer from two sites (2-3 and 4-5 people per shift) to a total number (range: 6 – 20; mean: 13).

Outside London, multiple agencies were involved in addition to council teams, including drug & alcohol, health and social care and women's services, housing providers and other homelessness services.

3.4 Data collection

Data collection included both the collection of survey data from women who had experienced rough sleeping in the three months prior to the census week, and the collation of basic data from multi-agency meetings within local authority areas to estimate the number of women currently being supported who are rough sleeping.

To summarise the scale of work undertaken for this census report:

Table 1: Summary of data sources for the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census

Census survey	30 London boroughs plus 14 LAs across England agreed to participate in the survey[33], resulting in 815 responses included in the analysis[34].
Multi-agency data meetings	22 areas returned notes from data meetings. These were: **London:** Barking and Dagenham; Brent; Bromley; Camden; City of London; Ealing; Greenwich; Hackney; Hammersmith and Fulham; Haringey; Hounslow; Islington; Kensington and Chelsea; Lambeth; Redbridge; Westminster and Tower Hamlets. **Outside of London:** Bury; Coventry; Gloucestershire; Leeds and Nottingham.
Methodology forms	Summary data were recorded for Greater London, plus individual meeting notes were received from six non-London sites: Bolton; Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole; Cambridge city; Gloucestershire; Herefordshire and Nottingham.
Focus groups	One focus group was undertaken with women with lived experience of homelessness to gather insight on gender-informed outreach following testing of these practices during the census.

In total, 815 census responses were included in the analysis. The geographical breakdown of those responses is given in the table below, which also highlights available data on the number of hours dedicated to outreach per site and the numbers of people working outreach shifts during census week.

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[33] Although 4 London boroughs which agreed to take part did not return any census data. These were: Bromley, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston and Merton.
[34] Alongside duplicate responses, responses were excluded if they indicated that the respondent had slept rough but not in the last three months, had had a homelessness experience other than rough sleeping, either in the last three months or prior, or had not experienced rough sleeping or similar at all.

Table 2: Geographical distribution of 2023 census results

Local authority area	Census data	Scale of outreach conducted	
		Hours of outreach	No. people on outreach shifts
London[35]	*391*	*No data*	*No data*
Greater Manchester[36]	*188*	*Bolton only: 16*	*Bolton: 6*
Coventry	*61*	*No data*	*No data*
Leeds	*50*	*No data*	*No data*
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	*43*	*49*	*4-5 per shift (14 shifts)*
Nottingham	*41*	*25*	*16*
Gloucestershire	*21*	*31*	*20*
Cambridge city	*13*	*12*	*2-3 per shift*
Herefordshire	*7*	*15*	*8*

Data review meetings were also introduced for the 2023 census, following feedback after the 2022 census suggesting that teams knew more women who were rough sleeping but had not been found during census week. 22 local authorities held data review meetings – 17 London boroughs[37] and five areas outside of London[38]. See further section 4.3.

The next section of this report describes the census findings from across the 42 local authorities that provided data for the 2023 census. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the huge effort undertaken by all participating services, women's rough sleeping is exceptionally hidden and therefore its true scale will not be fully captured by this snapshot.

4. Findings from the national 2023 census and data meetings

This section of the report aims to illustrate the hidden picture of women's rough sleeping in England to inform changes in policy and practice that will help women get better, more targeted support. After a brief case study, we present findings from the 2023 census and insights from the data compiled by agencies at data review meetings.

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[35] Thirty London boroughs agreed to participate in the census: Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Camden, City of London, Croydon, Ealing, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Newham, Redbridge, Richmond upon Thames, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Wandsworth and Westminster. Three boroughs did not take part: Enfield, Harrow and Sutton. Four of the boroughs that had agreed to participate did not return any data.
[36] Eight out of the 10 Greater Manchester local authorities participated in the census: Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport and Wigan.
[37] Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Bromley, Camden, City of London, Ealing, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Redbridge, Westminster and Tower Hamlets.
[38] Bury, Coventry, Gloucestershire, Leeds and Nottingham.

CASE STUDY 1: Emily's story

Emily is a 31-year-old single woman facing homelessness after multiple traumatic experiences. For several years she had been in a very abusive relationship with her ex-partner who led her to become dependent on drugs. Having left her partner, she was living in temporary shared accommodation and had submitted a homelessness application to the council. However, tensions with some of the other tenants led to Emily being evicted from her room.

Emily had already been supported by a service helping homeless men and women with drug and alcohol problems in the past - every time her partner had abused her. After sleeping rough for a couple of weeks, she returned to them to ask for support regarding her housing situation. She described how her mental health difficulties had made her relationships with other tenants difficult to manage and prevented her from maintaining her temporary accommodation. Staff created a safe space where Emily could share her experiences and took the time to listen to her story.

The homeless service had already discussed Emily's circumstances with the Council in the past, but the information about her previous traumas and mental health challenges were not taken into consideration when placing her in her new temporary accommodation. Unfortunately, the outcome was the same every time she was placed in a shared property with women who had experienced similar multiple disadvantages: Emily became stressed and emotionally dysregulated, lost her accommodation, and was left vulnerable and subject to abuse and violence whilst rough sleeping.

The homeless service runs a multi-agency drop-in session every Wednesday, where all women in need of a safe space, advice or social inclusion can talk to professionals and other women. During the drop-in, professionals from different organisations such as domestic abuse, legal aid and substance use services make suggestions for each woman's problems. It was clear to the professionals in the multi-agency drop-in that Emily had been through a lot of trauma and living in shared accommodation was detrimental to her mental health. Thanks to that more holistic approach, Emily was able to access legal aid from the local Law Centre to challenge the Council's decision.

The Law Centre attends the homeless service drop-in every other week to give advice on housing, immigration and many other areas. Both organisations work together to enable women who wouldn't know how to access legal support to start their recovery journey. Emily was referred to them after attending the drop-in to get advice for her housing situation. With help from the Law Centre, Emily has been able to challenge the council's decision, without which she would still be rough sleeping.

The homeless service's provision of a trauma-informed space where women can feel listened to, has a major impact on their lives. Women often have to repeat their experiences of trauma to many different services which can be distressing and even retraumatise them. Providing a safe space for women where they could meet professionals from multiple organisations at the same time is crucial to providing timely and effective support – and a concrete route out of homelessness.
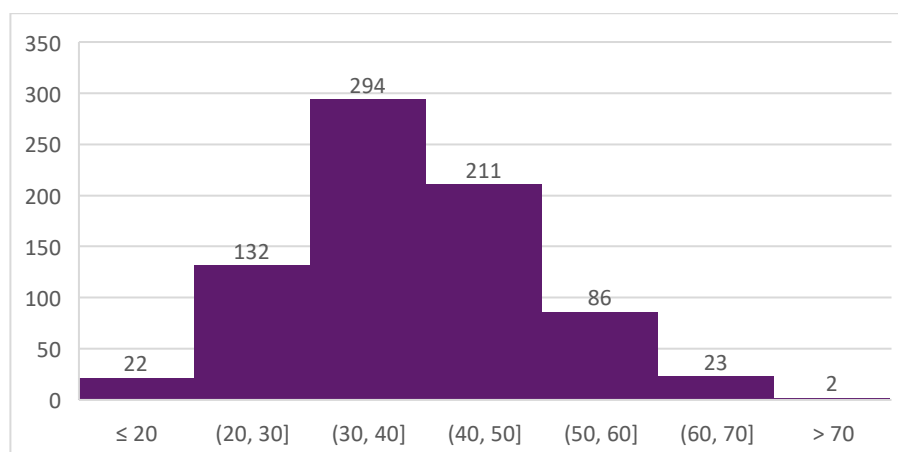
4.1 Findings from the 2023 census

Demographics

Age

Of 770 respondents who gave their age, the oldest was 80 on their last birthday, and the youngest was 14. Both the average (mean) and the most common (mode) age were 39 years old. Just over two thirds of respondents (516, 67%) fell into the 30-49 years category.

Figure 1: Age profile of women participating in the 2023 census

Gender

Of 750 respondents who were asked about their gender, the vast majority (736, 98.1%) identified as women. Of the remainder, five identified as non-binary, three preferred not to disclose, two identified as men, two as 'other' (with the further explanation of either gender-fluid or post-op transexual) and two did not answer the question. 65 census respondents were not asked about their gender, of which 61 were located in Coventry where this question was not included on the census.

Of 809 respondents asked whether their gender was the same as registered at birth, 97.4% (788) agreed that it was. 14 respondents were recorded as having a different gender to that registered at birth, with five preferring not to disclose, and two not answering the question at all. Six respondents were not asked this question.

Ethnicity

Of the 795 respondents asked about their ethnicity, the largest ethnic group represented was White (536 respondents, 67.4%), made up of White British (455 respondents), White Other (52 respondents), White Roma (15 respondents), White Irish (13 respondents) and White Gypsy Irish Traveller (one respondent).

120 respondents identified as Black or Black British (15.1%), of which 68 were African, 36 Caribbean and 16 Other.

6.9% of respondents (55) chose Mixed, broken down into Mixed White and Black – Caribbean (19 respondents), Mixed Other (18 respondents), Mixed White and Black – African (14 respondents) and Mixed White and Asian (four respondents).

Asian respondents made up 4.7% of the total (37 respondents), of which 13 were Asian or Asian British Other, 10 were Asian or Asian British Indian, six were Asian or Asian British Bangladeshi and Asian or Asian British Pakistani respectively, and two were Asian or Asian British Chinese.

Of the 36 respondents (4.5%) who fell into the 'other' category, 20 chose to self-describe, most commonly giving answers on nationality rather than ethnicity. Nine respondents chose not to disclose their ethnicity, four identified as Arab, and three as Gypsy Romany Irish Traveller.

11 respondents did not answer the question on ethnicity, and a further 20 were not asked.

Figure 2: Ethnicity profile of women participating in the 2023 census
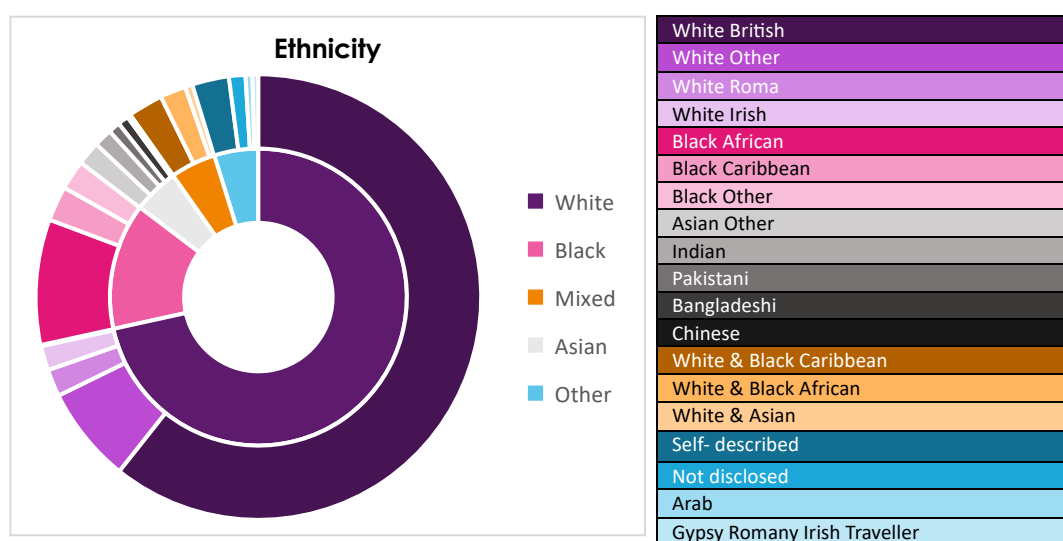
For context, it can be useful to reflect on the proportion of ethnic groups in England and Wales as a whole (drawing on data from the 2021 Office for National Statistics Census). In England and Wales, Black, Caribbean or African ethnic groups make up 4% of the population and mixed ethnic groups make up 2.9%[39]. In the women's rough sleeping census these ethnic groups comprise 15.1% and 6.9% of the sample respectively – initially suggesting a much higher prevalence of rough sleeping among women from Black and other ethnic groups. However, with the majority of survey responses coming from London and Manchester, these rates actually reflect the ethnic composition of those areas.

In contrast, Asian ethnic groups represent 9.3% of the population in England and Wales, but only 4.7% of the total respondents in the women's rough sleeping census. Given that Asian ethnic groups are also more likely to experience homelessness than White ethnic groups[40], their underrepresentation in this data could reflect a different experience of homelessness for

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[39] Office for National Statistics (2022). *Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021* https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglanda ndwales/census2021. Finney N. (2022) *Ethnic inequalities and homelessness in the UK*. Centre for Homelessness Impact. ISBN: 978-1-914132-25-4 63e6476b4d417106be76eae5_CHI.Ethnic.Inequalities.homelessness.pdf (website-files.com)

[40] Bramley G., Fitzpatrick S., McIntyre J. and Johnsen S. 2022. Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities State of the Nation. Heriot Watt University. Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities State of the Nation Report.pdf (dropbox.com)

women – or it could reflect a gap in reaching Asian women who are experiencing rough sleeping.

Geographical Spread

A total of 815 usable responses were collected by outreach workers for the census. Of these, the largest group came from the London boroughs (391 responses, 48%), with a large number also in Greater Manchester (188 responses, 23%). The remaining responses were collected in Coventry (61, 7%), Leeds (50, 6%), Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (43, 5%), Nottingham (41, 5%), Gloucestershire (21, 3%), Cambridge (13, 2%) and Herefordshire (7, 1%).

Experiences of Sleeping Rough

Frequency and duration

For those asked how many nights during the last three months had been spent sleeping rough (810 respondents), the most common answer was 'every night' (172 respondents, 21.2%), followed by 'more than 60 nights' (137 respondents, 16.9%), and 'more than 30 nights' (106 respondents, 13.1%).

Of those responding 30 nights or fewer in the last three months, a significant proportion had spent between two and five nights sleeping rough (103 respondents, 12.7% of total), indicating either a continuing influx of new rough sleepers or a population for whom occasional rough sleeping takes place; the latter situation suggesting an unstable accommodation situation in any case.

Of the 812 respondents asked when they had last slept rough, just under half (386, 47.5%) had slept rough the previous night. 22.2% (180 respondents) had slept rough in the last three months, with 15.5% (126 respondents) in the last week and 13.1% (106 respondents) in the last month. 13 respondents did not answer this question.

Over half of respondents had slept rough for more than a third of the time in the previous three months, suggesting that rough sleeping is a common feature of respondents' lives. That a high proportion of women are not sleeping rough every night also suggests that patterns of rough sleeping may be intermittent for many women.

The number of respondents who had slept rough the previous night or in the previous week is also much higher than other statistics typically show (see section 4.4). Combined with the fact that not all respondents are sleeping rough every night, this suggests that the make-up of the population of women who are rough sleeping in a given week may change regularly.

There are also a high proportion of women who slept rough for less than a month out of the past three, and a high number sleeping rough between 2-5 nights. It is possible that some respondents were starting or ending their period of sleeping rough within the last three months. But this is unlikely to be the case for all of them. Some women are therefore resorting to rough sleeping for a small proportion of the time. Again, this limits the opportunities available for outreach to see women rough sleeping, and points to experiences and causes of homelessness that may require a range of different responses, likely including domestic abuse support or short-term interventions.

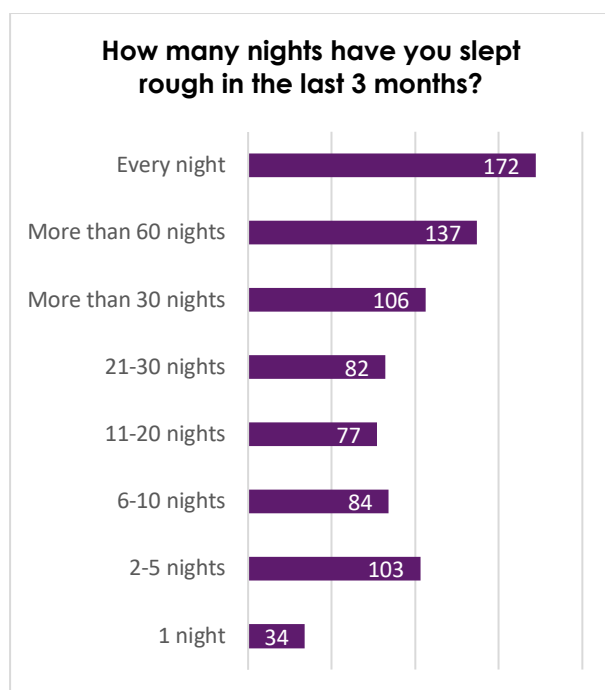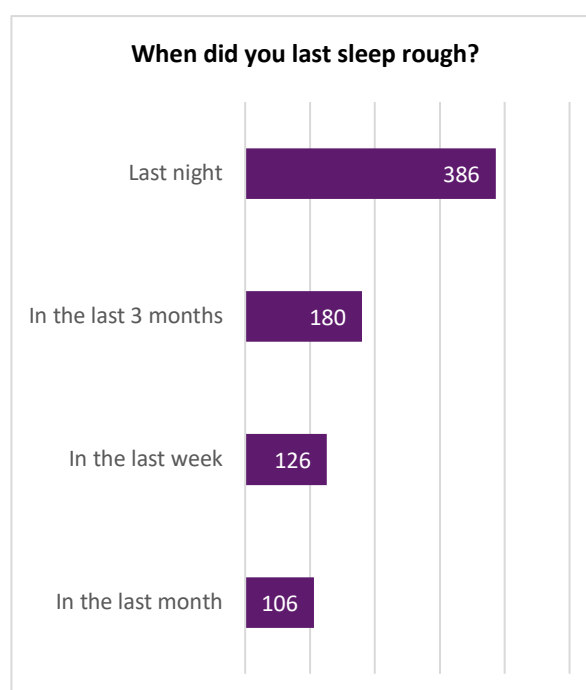**Figure 4: Number of nights sleeping rough in previous 3 months**

How many nights have you slept rough in the last 3 months?

Every night	172
More than 60 nights	137
More than 30 nights	106
21-30 nights	82
11-20 nights	77
6-10 nights	84
2-5 nights	103
1 night	34

Figure 5: Last time sleeping rough

When did you last sleep rough?

Last night	386
In the last 3 months	180
In the last week	126
In the last month	106

Location of rough sleeping[41]

753 respondents gave details of the various places they had slept or stayed during the previous three months. Over half (423, 56.2%) had slept outside on the street, and a substantial number (274, 36.4%) had walked around all night. Public spaces were often cited, with 25.1% (189 respondents) having stayed at a bus or train station, 13.1% (99 respondents) on a bus or train, and 12% (90 respondents) in a McDonalds or similar location. 12.9% (97 respondents) had stayed in a squat, and 7.8% (59 respondents) in a car. Alternative public locations not specified on the census form itself included parks (13 respondents), tents (8 respondents), car parks (5 respondents), churches, bin sheds and stairwells (4 respondents each).

Respondents sometimes tapped into their own personal networks to find temporary shelter, with 29.1% (219 respondents) reporting having stayed with a friend, and 10.8% (81 respondents) having stayed with a relative. However, women also reported having to stay with people they did not know; just over a fifth of all respondents had stayed with a stranger or new acquaintance at least once in the last three months (21.5%, 162 respondents). This is a concerning and high-risk option for women to resort to.

Some women had stayed in various forms of accommodation provided to relieve homelessness (31.6%, 238 respondents); 12% (90 respondents) reported spending time at a hostel or homelessness service. B&Bs, hotels or temporary accommodation (11.3%, 85 respondents), night shelters (4.9%, 37 respondents) and refuge accommodation (3.5%, 26 respondents) were also cited. Additionally, 4% of women (30 respondents) had spent time in owned, rented or social rented accommodation.

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[41] The analysis in this section does not include data from Coventry, who asked an alternative question.

A number of women had spent time in healthcare or criminal justice settings, with 12% (90 respondents) staying in A&E waiting rooms, 8.8% (66 respondents) in hospital and 3.7% (28 respondents) in custody. Five respondents also reported spending the night in police stations.

The need to keep moving was apparent from women's responses; the average number of places stayed in the last three months was 3, with 65% (490 respondents) having stayed in two or more places, and 48.8% (368 respondents) having stayed in three or more places. The highest number of locations reported by one respondent was 19.

Not all of the locations mentioned will form part of outreach teams' current practices, and therefore those currently omitted should be added as part of gender-informed approaches and adaptations to outreach. A number of these locations are also not encompassed by the current government definition of rough sleeping: changes to this definition could support teams and services to incorporate them into their practice and referral requirements.

However, some of these locations will not be accessible to outreach, or can make it very difficult to identify someone as rough sleeping, for example the 36.4% of respondents who had spent their nights walking. This speaks to a need for alternative and multi-agency approaches to reaching and responding to women who may be rough sleeping, including a 'no wrong door' approach which would enable women to access support and be identified as rough sleeping through the first service they speak to. If services are less easily able to identify women who are rough sleeping, this increases the importance and credence which should be placed on self-reported rough sleeping – rather than relying solely on professional judgement.

Figure 6: Locations for sleeping rough in the past three months
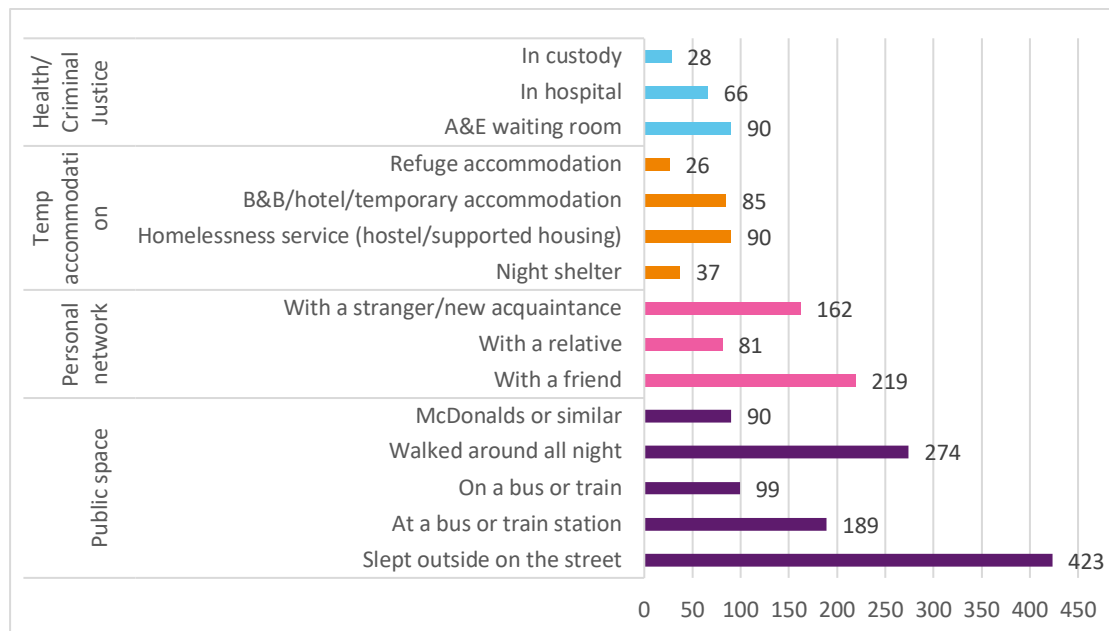
Location prior to rough sleeping

Before sleeping rough, a large number of women had been in precarious accommodation. Of 813 women who were asked about their previous accommodation, over a quarter (213, 26.2%) had been sofa surfing, 91 (11.2%) in supported housing such as hostels, 45 (5.5%) in hostels with no support, 37 (4.6%) in emergency accommodation and 19 (2.3%) in refuge

accommodation. Other temporary arrangements included temporary accommodation from the council (55 respondents, 6.8%) and asylum accommodation (24 respondents, 3%). Several respondents stated that they had been living with friends, staying at a rehab facility, or living in accommodation attached to a job, usually domestic or care work.

Combining these categories (excluding sofa surfing), we can see that 33.45% of respondents were in some form of accommodation provided to relieve homelessness prior to their period of rough sleeping. Evidently, these measures did not prevent women from needing to resort to rough sleeping and from experiencing the associated risks. However, this does point to a specific problem and solution: while there remains an overall severe shortage of housing in England and a low proportion of women-only homelessness options[42], there are evidently accommodation options which do exist, but which are not working for respondents. These could be better utilised and adapted to support women more effectively. Just over a quarter of women had been in rented or owned accommodation prior to sleeping rough. 10.8% (8 respondents) had been in a home owned by either themselves, a close family member or a partner; 10.5% (85 respondents) in private rented accommodation, and 5.7% (46 respondents) in social rented housing.

It is worth noting the low prevalence of social housing compared to private/owned accommodation among respondents. This could reflect the decimation of social housing over previous decades - highlighting the length of time people spend in temporary and other forms of homelessness accommodation with very poor access to social housing among women experiencing multiple disadvantage. It could also be due to social housing providing a higher element of security – with a smaller proportion of people 'falling' out of social housing into rough sleeping - which would indicate the unmet need for the added security of (supported) social housing among this group.

For some women, the current period of rough sleeping had been preceded by a transition of some sort. 24 respondents (3%) had previously been living in another country, with a further 21 (2.6%) exiting prison onto the streets and 10 (1.2%) leaving hospital to end up rough sleeping.

Services accessed by rough sleepers

Most women were in contact with at least one support service, generally more, with the average being two to three services. 14% (116 respondents) were in touch with five or more services, and the highest number of services being used by an individual was 15. Almost half of the women completing the survey were not being supported by a homelessness organisation however. 56 women (6.9%) stated that they were not in contact with any support services, and 221 (27%) were accessing only one service. For the latter, this was most likely to be a homeless organisation (77 women), a women's centre (44 women), a drug or alcohol support service (29 women), a housing officer/council housing department (18 women) or a domestic abuse/sexual violence support service (11 women).

Homelessness organisations were the most commonly accessed source of support, used by 53.1% (430 of 810 respondents). A third of women accessed drug or alcohol support services (265 respondents) and just over a quarter (26.8%, 217 respondents) were in touch with a women's centre or service.

Practical or survival matters featured most highly for women using support services. The services most often accessed provided support on food, housing, health and employment. A

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[42] Homeless Link. 2023. *Annual Review of Support for Single Homeless People in England*. 2022 Annual Review of Support for Single Homeless People in England | Homeless Link

third of women (32%, 260 respondents) accessed either a food bank or a soup kitchen, with 28% (227 respondents) in touch with a housing officer or housing association. 21.9% (177 respondents) used a health service, and 13.3% went to a Job Centre. However, only 2% of respondents sought support from Citizen's Advice.

The prioritisation of practical support may reflect the fact that such issues are top of women's hierarchy of needs, or that such services are easier to access – perhaps due to being better known or less stigmatising. The existence of other types of service (e.g. homelessness support services, women's services) vary from area to area, change with funding and commissioning rounds and are less known to the general public. There is also the possibility that many women do not identify with being homeless or do not always see themselves as the people that specific services are aimed at. The poor treatment and exclusion that many people who are rough sleeping experience at council offices may well put them off reaching out further. As the European Evidence Review points out: *"many women struggle, both emotionally and psychologically, with their status as homeless, sometimes expressing a preference for engagement with non-homelessness spaces because they are not overtly or publicly identified as 'homeless' in these contexts"*[43].

Services supporting personal wellbeing were secondary to the above but were still accessed by some women. The most commonly used by respondents were domestic abuse or sexual violence support services (11.1%, 90 respondents) and social services (9.1%, 74 respondents). Other services accessed included probation (6.5%, 53 respondents), religious or faith groups (5.4%, 44 respondents) and police (4.6%, 37 respondents).

4.2 Qualitative data: case study and survey text responses

In order to keep individual women's lived experiences, rather than just the scale of the problem in the forefront of our minds, we are presenting qualitative findings from the census work – a case study from a young woman who has consented to share her story and free text responses to the census survey.

Lainey faced very traumatic experiences from a young age and lived with a number of relatives before leaving home at the age of 16. She became homeless, slept in a lot of different places and experienced sexual violence before finally receiving support and eventually moving into women-only accommodation.

Please note that Lainey's story contains elements which some readers may find distressing.

Trigger warning: the following case study includes reference to domestic homicide, suicide, child abuse, rape and false imprisonment.

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[43] Bretherton J. and Maycock P. (2021) Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review. Brussels: FEANTSA. Women's homelessness: European evidence review (whiterose.ac.uk) Page 34.

CASE STUDY 2: Lainey's story

"When I was nine, I witnessed my mother's boyfriend murder her. I hid behind the sofa, and he told me that if I made any noise, he'd come back and kill me. He hung himself in our local park later that day.

After that, my brother and I lived with my Nan, Grandad and Auntie. My Auntie was verbally and physically abusive to me. My Grandad would stand up for me and tell her to leave me alone. He was like a Dad to me. After he and my Nan died, I didn't have anyone to stand up for me anymore.

At this point, Lainey and her brother went to live with her aunt:

'It's your fault your mum was murdered.' That's what my Auntie used to say to me before she'd punch me. on my body where no one would see the bruises. The social worker would come round to check in and take me out to Tesco to get bits and pieces, but she didn't really listen to me about what was happening with my Auntie. She'd just fob me off. … All they saw was a clean house and food on the table and judged everything to be fine. They didn't listen to me. They never took it seriously. I wish they understood more about abuse and that family can be very manipulating. If they did, maybe my brother and I would have got the help we needed. I held on for six months and then I left. I was 16.

… I felt I had no choice but to get away from the situation and area when I was 16… I remember showering, getting myself ready and walking out the door. It was summer, and I felt freedom. I felt like I could do anything I wanted, and nobody would judge me. I was wearing my silver Nikes, jeans, a belly top and a black hoodie. I didn't pack a change of clothes. I thought I would leave and get help. I had no idea I'd be on the road for two years. After a couple days, I called social services from a phone booth and told them everything. But they said I'd made myself intentionally homeless. I didn't know what this meant, but I knew they wouldn't help me.

I slept in my friend's car for six months. It was broken down and parked on a side street. I love wordsearches so I would sit in the car and do the puzzles. I think people reported that I was there because the council came and took the car away one morning. They told me I couldn't sleep there. That's when it really kicked in for me. That car was somewhere where I felt safe and now it was taken away. I was so scared.

I don't remember sleeping much after that. I would roam around and travel on buses. As a female, you can't just go to the corner of a road and sleep. It's not safe. I remember it rained a lot. The worst is when it's raining and cold, and you can't get dry. I still had those same Nike trainers on, and they gave me blisters.

I made a friend called Billy on the street. I felt like I could trust him because he didn't want anything from me. He had a room in a derelict block of flats and let me sleep there whilst he went out. He was kind. One day when he wasn't there, three men came and locked me in. They raped me and kept me there for days. I didn't have a phone so I couldn't call for help. When I saw the door open, I just ran. Nothing was going through my head other than escape. I just kept running. I ended up in a big park, went into a bush and cried for hours until no more tears came out. I didn't tell anyone for months because I didn't want people to say that I made it happen.

One day, things changed. I was near a train station, and a lady came up to me and told me she would help. At first, I didn't trust her. I thought she was doing it just for a laugh. She called

her keyworker at Single Homeless Project and asked her to help. I thought [the keyworker] would just let me down like all the others in the police and social services. I was so shocked that someone wanted to help me. I got food, clothing and a place to live straight away.

Three years later, I live in a Single Homeless Project home with only women. I feel safe, I have more energy and I'm open to doing more things. [My keyworker] is like family to me. I know I can tell her anything and she's never disappointed in me. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for her. I recently trained as a barista, started a cookery course and have a kitten, Patchie. I love animals because they don't judge you. The love they show you isn't fake. I'm going to college in September to study animal management. I want to be a vet and work in the countryside.

I want everyone to know that homelessness is harder than anyone thinks it is and not to judge people. On the street, I can always spot someone who doesn't have anything. I'd like to tell them that help is out there and not to give up."

Lainey's case study reveals the tragic circumstances that so often lie behind homelessness and the way that some agency responses create more harm (i.e. removing the car, which left her more vulnerable). Thankfully she was eventually put in touch with a supportive key worker who helped her access safe accommodation.

Qualitative findings from the census survey

The census survey was intentionally designed to be very brief, but two local areas asked participants if they would like to add any further comments. The qualitative data gathered from this are presented here.

In Gloucestershire and Greater Manchester, census participants were given the opportunity to supply some extra context around their experiences of rough sleeping. Data from these extra questions was coded into the following themes which emerged from their responses (in order of prevalence).

Vulnerability and Fear

14 women spoke about feeling vulnerable or unsafe. This was often linked to gender, with many feeling that they were more likely to be approached, taken advantage of, or targeted as a woman. Difficulty finding a safe space to sleep was mentioned several times, as well as difficulty finding information on sources of help due to fear of engaging with others. The words 'scared' and 'scary' were a recurring theme across the free text survey responses, and as with vulnerability, this was linked to gender. Women described needing to find places to hide or male companions due to fear of being vulnerable whilst asleep, and fear about exploring social housing options due to the risk of being placed in a dangerous environment.

Survival Tactics

13 women described steps they or others take/might take in order to secure a 'safe' place to sleep. This included staying with abusive partners, engaging in sex work or sexual relationships with men, and partnering with male rough sleepers for protection. Some described having to provide or take drugs in order to stay at a particular location. Feeling unsafe sleeping on the streets, some women tried to mitigate the danger by staying out of sight, with others taking the opposite approach and choosing public spaces to rough sleep in.

"I've had to do things with men that I didn't want to do, in exchange for somewhere to stay for a night"

Women's Rough Sleeping Census Participant

A need for gender-specific services

Women emphasised a need for services catering specifically for women sleeping rough. Due to the increased risk for women and the consequent need to stay out of sight, they are not always easily found by traditional outreach services. Likewise, respondents note that isolation makes it difficult for women sleeping rough to hear about service provision from others. They suggest posters, billboards and digital advertising, as well as clearly signposted points of contact. A desire for female outreach workers was also implied.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Several women stated that they had experienced sexual violence while sleeping rough. They described being approached, sexually assaulted, or raped by men either whilst sleeping rough or in unsafe accommodation. Sexual and gender-based violence was also a precursor to sleeping rough, with women fleeing abusive partners or family members.

Mental/Physical Health

Several women mentioned anxiety and mental health issues due to the stress of rough sleeping. Physical health deterioration was also implied, with several women stating that rough sleeping was 'making me ill'.

Feminine Hygiene

Several women mentioned the difficulty of managing periods, including access to period products and personal hygiene.

We now turn to consider the professional insights shared through the Data Review meetings in local areas participating in the census.

4.3 Findings from the data review meetings

After the 2022 census, teams reported that they knew of women who were rough sleeping but would not be identified during census week. The desire to ensure that these women were represented in the census led to planning for data review meetings.

Upon completion of the 2023 census, 22 local authorities held data review meetings – 17 London boroughs[44] and five areas outside of London[45]. On average five organizations per location participated in or contributed information to the data meetings (Range of organisations: 1-12, Sum: 100). It is important to note this range of participating organisations,

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[44] Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Bromley, Camden, City of London, Ealing, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Hounslow, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Redbridge, Westminster and Tower Hamlets. In this report we often make a distinction between London and non-London sites. This is for a number of reasons, including that the census was first implemented in London in 2022 – so for most London boroughs this census is their second set of results and given the scale of involvement of London boroughs, there are a lot of survey responses from women who sleep rough in the capital.
also to say that in 2022 and 2023 there has been dedicated resource available in London to support LAs to take part (census core team) - this speaks to the need in the recommendations for the government to support and resource support for all LAs to be undertake the census/GI outreach practice changes.
[45] Bury, Coventry, Gloucestershire, Leeds and Nottingham.

as this will have affected the breadth of insight that could be accessed – and the comprehensiveness of the data gathered.

Data meetings included a wide range of professionals, including:

- Rough sleeping coordinators
- Outreach managers
- Rough sleeping navigators
- Complex needs navigators
- Homeless healthcare nurses
- Safer Neighbourhood Officers
- Caseworkers/practitioners and managers from drug and alcohol teams, homelessness support services, specialist VAWG support services
- Housing First outreach navigators
- Housing officers
- IDVAs (Independent Domestic Violence Advocates)
- Rough sleeping commissioners
- Hostel caseworkers and managers
- Day centre staff and managers
- Food bank managers
- Probation officers
- Social workers
- Outreach nurses
- Hospital homelessness discharge workers
- Immigration advice caseworkers
- Mental health practitioners

Key quantitative findings from the data review meetings can be summarised as follows[46]:

- The total number of women that organisations had case notes on who had slept rough in the three months prior to the data review meeting (using the census definition of rough sleeping) was 879. The range was 0 – 135, making an average of 42 women per local authority area.
- The number of additional women who agencies knew to be sleeping rough but did not have any recorded details for totalled 203, range 0 – 60, making an average of 10 women per local authority area.
- This means that the actual total number of women who were known to be rough sleeping totalled 1082 across the 22 sites, with a mean of 52 women per local authority area (ranging from 8 – 145 women). For London alone, the range was 8 – 145, mean: 46.
- Interpreting this data is challenging. Sites that did not prepare or could not share full lists of women being supported at the meeting had all their data recorded as 'unknown' because it was not possible to cross reference it. Despite careful provisions being put in place to make data sharing possible (i.e.: signed data sharing protocols with strict parameters on what data were shared and how it was to be used), numerous difficulties were experienced in attempting to share this data. This limited not only the census's ability to gather comprehensive data, but also the level of multi-agency working which could take place locally.

The number of women rough sleeping who were known to multiple organisations in the data meeting ranged from 0 – 43, with a mean of 8 per site. Although open to interpretation, this may largely correlate to the level of multi-agency working in an area. It is important to note how much higher the numbers of rough sleeping women are from the data review meetings compared with other rough sleeping estimates and the survey returns from the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census (See Table 3, section 4.4). This provides strong evidence that there are many women being missed in existing counts (i.e.: snapshots and CHAIN in London) and that new or additional methods of collecting data about women's rough sleeping are needed.

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[46] A review of the process of implementing the data review meetings and lessons learnt is contained in section 5.

Figure 7: Comparison of women's rough sleeping numbers according to the 2023 Rough Sleeping Snapshot, the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census survey, and the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census data meetings, for locations where data is available on all three.

Legend:
- ■ Rough Sleeping Snapshot 2023
- ■ Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023
- ■ 2023 data meeting – recorded and 'unknown' women
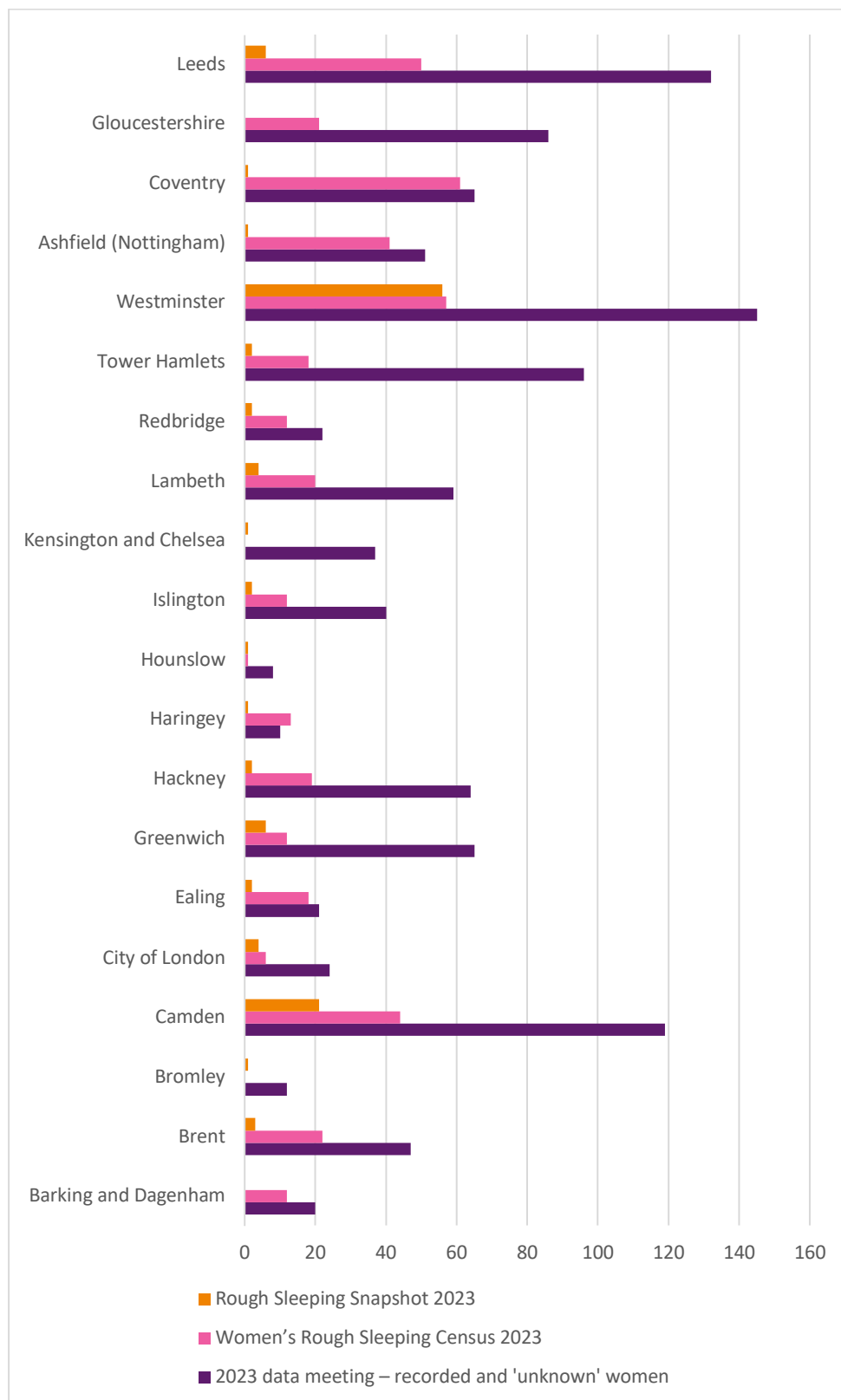
The data review meetings also generated a substantial amount of valuable qualitative data. Overall, meeting discussions emphasized the complexity of addressing the multiple needs of women who sleep rough, many of whom have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of violence. Practitioners emphasized the importance of tailored and comprehensive support services to address women's diverse needs effectively. Key discussion points raised are summarised here:

Identifying and reaching women who are sleeping rough

Current definitions of rough sleeping often fail to accurately identify women, as women tend to stay hidden during the day and move frequently to avoid vulnerability at night. Women are less likely to "bed down" compared to men, often only if they have a male companion. They often transition rapidly between rough sleeping and sofa surfing and this more transient lifestyle makes it difficult for outreach teams to locate or verify women who are sleeping rough. Women are also more likely to spend nights in inconspicuous indoor locations (like A&E departments) or on public transport - making daytime outreach more effective in finding them. In London, rough-sleeping women often move between boroughs, using public transport, which can make tracking them more difficult. Transport for London may therefore have a key role in notifying outreach services when women are identified as possibly rough sleeping.

Needs and presentation to services

Women who sleep rough have typically experienced substantial trauma that contributed to their homelessness, including domestic abuse, other violence against women and girls (VAWG), and intersecting issues such as problematic substance use, mental health difficulties, immigration status challenges, language barriers and LGBTQ+ identity. Key considerations include:

Impact of Violence: Women face risks of violence and exploitation, including sexual and drug trafficking, which often leads to homelessness or unsafe living situations. Women may continue to experience violence while rough sleeping.

Multiple disadvantage: Women experiencing homelessness often have multiple support needs, making it challenging for them to engage with services: the proportion of women who eventually reach rough sleeping support who have multiple support needs is generally observed to be very high and services are often not flexible enough to meet their needs. Research indicates that women can often face worse treatment from service providers due to circumstances and behaviours which challenge gender stereotypes (i.e.: substance use and criminal justice contact).[47]

Mental Health: There is a significant gap in mental health provision, with women's mental health support needs often going unnoticed or unaddressed until their later stages.

Substance Use: Women with high substance use needs may find it difficult to access support services due to various service barriers, including gendered experiences of substance use and male-dominated services[48]. One area noted that women with high substance use needs were known about, but rarely seen due to staying in squats and drug houses.

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[47] Bretherton J. and Maycock P. (2021) Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review. Brussels: FEANTSA. Women's homelessness: European evidence review (whiterose.ac.uk)

[48] With You. (2021). *A system designed for women?* https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/who-we-are/research/research-report-a-system-designed-for-women/#:~:text=The%20report%20argues%20that%20drug,to%20cater%20for%20their%20needs.

Influence of Partners: Women's decisions and access to services may be heavily influenced by their partners due to dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control, making it difficult for professionals to provide assistance effectively and safely.

Unsafe Tenancies: Vulnerable women with tenancies often feel unsafe due to exploitation and may resort to rough sleeping instead.

Exploitation: Many women are exploited by men, but fear reporting it due to potential repercussions, hindering support efforts.

Immigration Challenges: Non-EU migrants, especially those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), face significant hurdles in accessing support and accommodation, with a lack of safe emergency pathways for women fleeing abuse who don't have recourse to public funds.

LGBTQ+ Concerns: LGBTQ+ women experiencing homelessness face unique challenges and may have specific support needs that are not adequately addressed. Services report difficulties in identifying and supporting trans women due to poor data collection and a lack of awareness about their needs.

How women engage with and use services

Women who sleep rough often delay seeking formal support from homelessness services until they have exhausted all other options. By this time, they typically have multiple complex support needs that are difficult to address comprehensively. Many women avoid community services and public spaces, especially if they have experienced trauma or encounter male staff. While they may use specific services, like food banks or alcohol and other drug support if prescribed, they often prefer to keep to themselves. Limited awareness of available services complicates their ability to seek consistent help. Women released from the criminal justice system may not actively seek support from local authorities. Despite vocalizing their needs, women with who have experienced multiple disadvantage may struggle to engage consistently with services. Barriers such as identification requirements further impede their access to assistance. Referrals to some rough sleeping teams usually only occur in cases of safeguarding concerns.

The need for trauma responsive approach

Specialist knowledge and skills are required to work with women in a trauma-informed way and manage risk appropriately. When women reach a service, they have often completely lost hope and may present as critical or fail to turn up to appointments. This can be quite demotivating for staff. Practitioners described hearing about lots of stigma and woman-blaming around rough sleeping from other professionals rather than trying to understand and support. They suggested that more training could help expand non-judgemental approaches.

However, even experienced practitioners can find it intimidating and risky to work with rough sleeping women – both in terms of risk from women, and not knowing how to respond adequately to the risks the women face. It is important that practitioners have been trained in trauma-informed practice and it should perhaps be mandatory for commissioned services to have regular gender-informed training. There is also a need for professional networking and support among people working in this field – to share support and advice among each other.

Services available

Women experiencing homelessness often struggle to access existing services, as they may not fit the criteria or face exclusion due to complexities such as drug use or sex work. Many women prioritise separate and secure accommodation, seeking women-only spaces for safety. However, even "safe" supported housing may not feel secure, leading to reluctance to stay there. A lack of specialist services exacerbates the issue, with housing providers often unaware of safety dynamics. Furthermore, support often diminishes once accommodation is secured, leading to disengagement and a return to rough sleeping or street activities.

Capacity issues contribute to the lack of suitable options for women, with many services unable to accommodate women who have experienced multiple disadvantage. Lack of women-specific spaces further compounds the problem, with limited options forcing women into unsafe situations. Access to accommodation is also hindered by factors such as out-of-area placements and a lack of support for couples.

Younger women face particular challenges, with limited services tailored to their needs. Safety concerns persist even within accommodation, with women frequently targeted and feeling unsafe in shared environments. Many women do not use their allocated rooms, preferring to stay elsewhere due to safety concerns. Access to accommodation remains a significant issue, with flexibility needed to accommodate the diverse needs of women experiencing homelessness.

Systemic barriers

There are many system-related factors that trap women in rough sleeping. For example, data collection and verification processes (such as the rough sleeping snapshot and CHAIN in London), do not effectively capture the experiences of women and result in inadequately funded services. Referral processes and support structures which are reliant on seeing people bedded down rough sleeping (such as Streetlink, or many outreach practices) likewise limit access to services. Rigid service structures render support inaccessible for women with complex trauma and many examples of poor statutory responses were shared, including instances where high-risk situations were not appropriately addressed due to bureaucratic barriers and lack of understanding. There were also frustrations with sourcing accommodation due to competition among agencies and challenges in the housing market. Developing effective services for women who sleep rough therefore requires a tailored approach that includes:

- Greater availability of accommodation services that understand the complexities of working with women who sleep rough and demonstrate a flexible approach, including re-opening cases and accommodating clients recommended by rough sleeping teams.
- More tailored, client-centred approaches, including flexible appointment times, non-judgmental attitudes and longer timeframes for building trust.
- Identification and eradication of barriers (e.g. the requirement for identification before accessing services and stigma towards people who sleep rough).
- Multi-agency working and relationships with partners (including, in London, neighbouring boroughs) to address the multiple disadvantages of women experiencing homelessness. Strong local connections or borough-based working are needed in London to promote continuity of care and access to services for women who move between boroughs.
- More sensitive and dynamic risk assessment – with resources that allow for appropriate and timely responses.
- Use of language that is sensitive and non-stigmatizing.

The recommendations that came out of the Data Review Meetings are all contained in section 6.

4.4 Discussion of findings

According to the data in the above sections, it is clear that women are sleeping rough to varying degrees (some with high frequency and others less so), and many are sleeping rough intermittently – not all women are sleeping rough every single night, even if sleeping rough is a very common experience for them. Women are also sleeping in locations that are unlikely to be visible using current outreach practices, particularly where these locations do not fit into the current rough sleeping definition.

These factors will have a significant impact on how services are able to reach women experiencing rough sleeping and demonstrate the need to adapt practice and adopt a truly cross-sector approach. For example, practices may be much less effective if they do not include the types of locations that women have listed, or work with the types of services or infrastructure (such as at stations and on transport), where women are more commonly seen. In addition, practices based on the assumption that a referral for a woman's rough sleeping location can be followed up a day or a few days later will be much less effective if women are not sleeping rough every night and are therefore no longer in the same location by the time services get there.

These findings also provide a measure of understanding about how services can approach relationships with women who are rough sleeping. If women's experiences of rough sleeping are intertwined with periods of unstable housing, services may need to alter expectations of consistent engagement or rapid closure of cases: women may experience long-term unstable housing and homelessness, interspersed with periods of rough sleeping, perhaps reaching out to services irregularly or at crisis point. Understanding this fluctuating experience may help services to better meet women's longer-term needs and patterns, and treat a woman's appearance at a service as an important opportunity to provide rapid and responsive support.

Both the 2022 and 2023 census findings reveal women's limited presentation to services when they sleep rough compared to the scale of their support needs. Importantly, the census data reveal where women go when they're rough sleeping (for example: A&E and public transport) – highlighting that traditional outreach can't be relied upon to reach them. Moreover, the 2022 census suggested that women's accessing of support tends to reduce over time – meaning it is imperative that every organisation encountering women who are rough sleeping or homeless provides them with immediate support and does not simply refer them on to another service. Services need to grasp every opportunity to prevent homelessness from worsening, by ensuring meaningful contact is made each time a woman presents, recognising that they and other services may not see her again, so that each contact needs to be treated as a crucial chance to respond to need, consider safeguarding issues and maximise safety.

The prevalence of experiences of violence and abuse among women who are homeless mean that service provision for women must immediately prioritise the development of safe spaces. Chaotic or unpredictable accommodation environments are not suitable, particularly for women who have experienced violence or abuse,[49] and make it more

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[49] Ralphs R., Wright S., Cornwall P. and Hanna P. 2022 *The effectiveness of the Manchester Street Engagement Hub.* Research Report, Manchester Metropolitan University.

difficult to escape from rough sleeping. Services need to be trauma-responsive[50], with staff who are appropriately trained and understand the need for expressly compassionate and shame-sensitive practice[51]. This is a situation that needs to be addressed through more adequate and ring-fenced resourcing around women's rough sleeping.

Unfortunately, it is not feasible to examine any relationship between the length or predominance of women's rough sleeping and the number of services accessed from the 2023 census. In future years this would be valuable analysis because it would allow us to see whether there is a general pattern of women engaging with fewer (or more) services as they experience more rough sleeping. If women become disheartened by early poor responses to their homelessness and cease trying to seek help, thereby becoming trapped in rough sleeping over the long-term, it is crucial to prioritise the adoption of 'no wrong door' policies that engage with all women at risk of, or in the early stages of rough sleeping.

As mentioned earlier, DLUHC Rough Sleeping Snapshot data could be used to suggest that women comprise around 15% of the total rough sleeper count[52]. But our analysis of the 2023 census data completely refutes that. The table below, presenting data from the London census sites, evidences the substantial gap between census and data meeting estimates of women's rough sleeping in participating localities on the one hand, and the Rough Sleeping Snapshot and CHAIN data on the other.

Table 3: Comparing Census 2023 and data meeting information with Rough Sleeping Snapshot and CHAIN data[53] [54]

Key: Pink cells indicate that census numbers are higher than both CHAIN and the snapshot for that location. Orange cells indicate that the census numbers are higher than the snapshot only.

London borough	Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023	2023 data meeting – recorded women	2023 data meeting - 'unknown' women	Rough Sleeping Snapshot 2023	CHAIN Q2 2023/24
Barking and Dagenham	12	20	0	0	5
Barnet	3	NA	NA	2	16
Bexley	3	NA	NA	2	7
Brent	22	28	19	3	13
Bromley	0	12	0	1	6
Camden	44	85	34	21	46
Camden, Islington and Haringey	13	NA	NA	NA	NA
City of London	6	16	8	4	18

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[50] https://www.dignifi.co.uk/

[51] Dolezal, L., Gibson, M. Beyond a trauma-informed approach and towards shame-sensitive practice. Humanities and Social Science Communication. 9, 214 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01227-z

[52] DLUHC (2023) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022.* Official Statistics. Published 28 February 2023. Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[53] The Rough Sleeping Snapshot takes place annually in local authorities across England. The snapshot provides information about the estimated number of people sleeping rough on a single night between 1 October and 30 November each year and is collected using either a count-based estimate of visible rough sleeping; an evidence-based estimate meeting; or an estimate meeting plus a spotlight count. The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities requires all local authorities to complete the snapshot and publishes the data; Homeless Link is funded to lead and support local authorities to deliver the snapshot.

[54] Combined Homelessness And Information Network (CHAIN) is a London multi-agency database recording information about people who have been seen ('verified') rough sleeping and people engaged in street activity, such as street drinking or begging. Information is primarily inputted by rough sleeping outreach teams, some accommodation services and other authorised agencies. CHAIN is commissioned and funded by the Mayor of London and run by Homeless Link.

London borough	Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023	2023 data meeting – recorded women	2023 data meeting - 'unknown' women	Rough Sleeping Snapshot 2023	CHAIN Q2 2023/24
Croydon	6	NA	NA	4	26
Ealing	18	14	7	2	27
Enfield	NA	NA	NA	1	8
Greenwich	12	61	4	6	23
Hackney	19	23	41	2	24
Hammersmith and Fulham	2	NA	60	0	29
Haringey	13	10	0	1	12
Harrow	NA	NA	NA	4	2
Havering	1	NA	NA	2	2
Hillingdon	5	NA	NA	2	9
Hounslow	1	7	1	1	21
Islington	12	38	2	2	28
Kensington and Chelsea	0	36	1	1	15
Kingston upon Thames	0	NA	NA	12	9
Lambeth	20	56	3	4	44
Lewisham	15	NA	NA	4	28
Merton	0	NA	NA	2	5
Newham	37	NA	NA	1	39
Redbridge	12	22	0	2	7
Richmond upon Thames	2	NA	NA	0	6
Southwark	10	NA	NA	5	24
Southwark and Lambeth	3	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sutton	NA	NA	NA	0	2
Tower Hamlets	18	93	3	2	27
Waltham Forest	9	NA	NA	6	8
Wandsworth	6	NA	NA	3	10
Westminster	57	135	10	56	170
Pan London	10	NA	NA	NA	NA

Local authorities outside London	WRSC 2023	Data meeting (recorded women)	Data meeting (unknown women)	Rough Sleeping Snapshot 2023	CHAIN data not available
Ashfield (Nottingham)	41	44	7	1	NA
Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	43	NA	NA	6	NA
Cambridge City	13	NA	NA	8	NA
Coventry	61	50	15	1	NA
Gloucestershire	21	76	10	0	NA
Greater Manchester	188	17 (Bury only)	1 (Bury only)	3	NA
Herefordshire	7	NA	NA	3	NA

London borough	Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023	2023 data meeting – recorded women	2023 data meeting - 'unknown' women	Rough Sleeping Snapshot 2023	CHAIN Q2 2023/24
Leeds	50	121	11	6	NA
Total	815	964	237	186	716

Whilst there was substantial variation across the participating local authorities, the Women's Rough Sleeping Census survey identified an average of 17 women per location (mean: 17 women; range: 0-61; n-48). In contrast, the 2023 data meeting estimates of rough sleeping women known to professionals revealed much higher figures (mean: 46 women; range: 7-135; n=21). This is over 9 times larger than the 2023 Rough Sleeping Snapshot estimates (mean: 5 women; range: 0-56; n=41). For the London boroughs, the 2023 data meeting estimates (mean: 41 women; range: 7-135; n=16) are over 8 times larger than the Rough Sleeping Snapshot estimates (mean: 5 women; range: 0-56; n=33) and almost double the CHAIN 2023/24 estimates (mean: 22 women; range: 2-170; n=33). This is of huge concern if commissioning decisions around provision for women who are rough sleeping are based on the hugely underestimated figures from the Rough Sleeping Snapshot or CHAIN data.

Since May 2023, the new DLUHC Rough Sleeping Data Framework has been in place,[55] requiring monthly reporting from local authority rough sleeping teams with the ultimate aim of making rough sleeping rare, brief and non-recurrent. This data framework measures people new to the streets, long-term rough sleepers, returners and institution-leavers. It captures information pertaining to specific local issues, but its approach is not gender-informed and does not report data disaggregated by gender, age or ethnicity.

This census indicates the scale of women in homelessness accommodation who subsequently move into rough sleeping – often because they feel unsafe in current provision (as well as a lack of appropriate support and other unsuitability factors). It is evident that some accommodation provision is not providing effective or safe relief from homelessness for many women, and this in particular needs to be remedied. While there will always be a need for further and specialist resources to meet the true scale of women's rough sleeping, work can be done to ensure that existing accommodation options can be safer and more effective for women, preventing highly avoidable periods of rough sleeping. For example, having more single-sex and trauma responsive accommodation would be of great benefit.

Data review meetings were generally found to be very useful in helping agencies to better understand the scale and nature of women's rough sleeping locally. The meetings helped identify where there was crossover between services and which organisations could work together more closely. Estimating the scale of women's rough sleeping gave local authorities more robust numbers to use for their own funding. It also highlighted what the biggest challenges and structural barriers were locally – which, alongside the data, could be used to inform commissioning and other changes.

The data review meeting discussions highlighted numerous challenges and gaps in addressing women's rough sleeping. Overall, the discussion emphasised the need for more holistic, flexible, and trauma-informed approaches, along with improved collaboration among agencies and statutory bodies.

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[55] Early adopter sites trialled the approach from October 2022.

Areas identified as needing change or improvement include:

1. **Service Flexibility:** Recognition of the importance of flexibility in service provision to accommodate the multiple disadvantages experienced by women facing homelessness. Calls for services to adopt client-centred approaches and provide non-judgmental support. It was highlighted that even where a specialist service might have high levels of flexibility, the need for them to work with other services with very low flexibility limited the efficacy of their work.

2. **Barriers to Access:** Removal or mitigation of barriers such as the requirement for identification before accessing services, lack of safety, stigma towards women experiencing homelessness, and limited knowledge of available services.

3. **Multi-Agency Collaboration:** Emphasis on the necessity of multi-agency collaboration and strong relationships with partners and neighbouring boroughs to effectively address the needs of women experiencing homelessness.

4. **Verification Processes:** Current verification processes (requiring someone to be seen bedded down rough sleeping in order to access a service, make a referral or be recorded in data collection) may not accurately capture the experiences of women and limit their access to services.

5. **Local Connection Requirements and Borough-Based Working:** Challenges related to local connection requirements and borough-based working, which can hinder continuity of care for women moving between boroughs.

6. **Statutory Response:** Criticisms of poor statutory responses to homelessness, including bureaucratic barriers and a lack of understanding of high-risk situations.

7. **Accommodation Challenges:** Lack of women-only accommodation and range for different need levels, lack of safety in both women-only and mixed settings, limited to no options for couples, and women finding accommodation so unsafe, unsuitable or unsupported that they resort or return to rough sleeping. (These factors reported in the data meetings underline the census survey responses which demonstrate that women are resorting to rough sleeping even after having been provided with accommodation intended to relieve their homelessness.)

8. **Language Sensitivity:** Recognition of the importance of using sensitive and non-stigmatising language when working with women experiencing homelessness.

One final comment is to note the growth in the numbers of women identified for sites that were participating in the census for their second year. This increase in the identified scale of women's rough sleeping is likely to be a result of much stronger partnership working one year on from an initial census, and should, we hope, provide strong encouragement for authorities to continue to participate in the census – even if their count was very low for the first year.

The next section describes what has been learnt through the process of undertaking both the census and the data meetings – with recommendations for future research.

5. Review of census and data review meeting methods

"The census was a really great opportunity to bring together multiple partners to discuss the needs of women, and an opportunity to highlight

the gaps in provision and gaps in understanding in terms of gender and trauma informed responses. It has provoked some positive conversations and provided impetus for development of services and the wider response to women's homelessness needs."

Gloucestershire census partner

Feedback on the methods implemented for the census was collected from practitioners via questionnaires[56], informal communication and a workshop held on 9th November 2023 to collate learning about conducting gender-informed outreach. This section of the report summarises the learning from that work.

5.1 Development of gender-informed outreach for census week

Gender-informed homelessness outreach entailed several changes to typical outreach practice, including:

- Implementation of day shifts
- Targeting different locations (such as hospitals and late-night cafes)
- Outreach workers going out in pairs with at least one woman on each shift, and
- Making phone calls to women known to the outreach service.

Other additional activities during census week included:
- Planning sessions with local organisations to arrange joint outreach shifts – particularly important where partner organisations were needed to offer female staff to join existing all-male outreach teams.
- Women's sessions – some locations held specific women's census sessions (often in day centres, sometimes rotating venues to places where women-only spaces did not previously exist) to encourage women to attend, complete the survey, receive a voucher and access other support including health in-reach services and wellbeing activities[57].
- The provision of volunteers to support day centres and some other health settings.
- Partnership approaches led by the women's sector (e.g. working with street sex worker charities to find women who would not otherwise be identified during normal outreach practice).
- One area sent out daily emails to networks of partner organisations to update about census activities and women's sessions taking place. This was especially valuable where outreach teams were based in male hostels with no space to meet women.

The preparation and coordination work undertaken before the census, including regular meetings between partners to identify and coordinate support for women was crucial to the success of the outreach. Intelligence gathering from relevant partners, women themselves and through assessing the records of women already known to services in advance of census week meant the outreach workers knew who to contact and where to go. This led to an increase in surveys being completed. Where areas did not have a strong support offer for women, this was invaluable. For example, one London borough only had an outreach office in a male hostel, so they used a local authority building during the women's census week as a safe space. This was highly fortunate as they found a woman who had come from outside London the night before and was heavily pregnant. They were able to take her to this building, do an assessment quickly and take her to housing options.

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[56] Summary data were recorded for Greater London along with individual notes from six non-London sites.
[57] One women's project in London held a BBQ for the census for women to attend and complete the survey if they wished.

In preparation for the 2023 census, the London census team met with eight women with lived experience of homelessness and held focus groups with a range of practitioners. These informed development of the census methodology and materials. Three of the six non-London areas were also able to include women with lived experience of homelessness in planning their delivery of census, although the number of women involved was not recorded. Discussions covered what women's rough sleeping entails; how to make census outreach workers' interactions compassionate and sensitive; and times and places for outreach to go to.

Most sites provided financial incentives for women completing the survey[58] offering vouchers for between £5-10, typically for a supermarket. Some areas either limited or prioritised the incentives for outreach sessions (i.e. vouchers were sent to day centres on request).

Five non-London areas provided/allowed for online and paper versions of the survey, one used paper questionnaires only. All London areas had access to a paper version as well as the online survey link.

5.2 Shift patterns
- Outreach shifts focused on rough sleeping hotspots, town centres and areas identified in the planning meetings, including soup kitchens, begging locations, churches, hostels, day centres and other services.
- Many outreach shifts were conducted in the early morning, and throughout the day, but night counts were also found to be successful.
- Friday and Saturday shifts in city/town centres or other places with a vibrant nightlife were found to best be conducted in the early hours of the morning.
- Staff based in services which might encounter women experiencing homelessness, such as supported housing schemes, housing options teams, A&E departments and substance use services were also asked to identify women accessing their services and invite them to complete the survey.
- Where a male worker had an established relationship with a woman, one area agreed they should complete the survey, rather than an unknown woman.
- Agencies with specific skills and knowledge of sex working women focused on this group.
- Where more rural parts of a county could not be covered, there is acknowledgement of a need to build intelligence on where women might be located in such areas.

5.3 Adapting the census questions
None of the areas made changes to the census methods promoted by the survey organisers. However, three areas made changes to the survey itself. Both were county-wide local authorities and had changed mentions of 'borough' to 'districts' to reflect local political geography. One also added an additional question: '**What features do you feel are important in accommodation that is specifically designed for women who are rough sleeping?**' so that they could understand the kind of housing provision[59] wanted by women who sleep rough. The information gained from this question was reported to be very helpful in providing insight to drive system change and commissioning responses that better meet the needs of women experiencing rough sleeping, whilst also helping providers to think about how to co-produce housing pathways and solutions in the future.

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[58] Voucher packs were sent to 39 London outreach services.
[59] i.e. the type of accommodation and facilities; the safety and security of the accommodation; the support provided; pathways into and out of the accommodation.

5.4 The benefits and challenges of conducting the census

All areas had involved multiple services in the census and all conducted joint outreach sessions – for one area this was the only way to ensure at least one woman participated in the shift as their outreach team was all male. Areas reported a good initial response from partners but in some locations that input diminished over time. However, all agencies that did engage were pleased to be part of the census: in general they did not need convincing of the need for this work and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to it.

The benefits for organisations participating in census week included:
- Improved partnership working through conducting joint shifts and sharing intelligence and resources to inform work. Some teams became aware of more rough sleeping locations.
- The survey itself provided opportunities for discussion with women about their circumstances – it was quick and easy to complete, well-designed with questions appropriate for them, and the vouchers worked well to incentivise women to participate.
- Encouragement to conduct gender-informed outreach allowed teams to target locations and time their shifts when they knew they could find women (e.g. a 1am spotlight count). In some areas they were then able to provide some women they found with accommodation. Some areas are now considering permanent adoption of gender-informed approaches.
- The work sparked more inter-agency conversations about women's housing and rough sleeping needs - looking at commissioning opportunities to include gender-informed pathways. Discussions improved understanding and allowed practitioners to explore new methods of trying to reach women and grasp more about the relationship between their experiences and support needs on the one hand, and homelessness practices on the other.

"Focusing on women specifically was a breath of fresh air, they often feel unseen and unheard, there are so few services for them and the complex issues they deal with. It was nice to be singled out and heard".

Workshop participant

Challenges in conducting the survey included:

- The practicalities of preparing for census week - struggling to engage some agencies due to limited engagement time in census planning and delivery, particularly for areas late to join the census.
- The availability and capacity of practitioners to carry out the survey within their role.
- Identifying and approaching women.
- Being able to accurately represent women known to be sleeping rough in recorded figures.
- Because existing accommodation pathways do not respond to women's needs (e.g. accommodation curfews excluding women who are sex working as they are unable to comply with the rules), the consequent limitations in providing tangible support to women sleeping rough made it challenging to build effective relationships with them on outreach shifts.
- Getting VAWG services on board in some areas – although engagement improved for the second year of the census.
- Some data collected gave rise to concerns, i.e. identifying women who are sleeping rough every night but not known to the local authority. However, with no record of

which professionals completed each survey from partner agencies, this can't be looked into further.

Many of the difficulties encountered in conducting the census stem from the systemic and practice difficulties that create a need for the census in the first place. Practitioners already recognise the need to reach more women who sleep rough, develop better relationships with them, and better understand and implement gender-informed practices, but currently they need to deliver the census in spite of these barriers[60]. Challenges that were linked to local system gaps included:

- The need for more partnership work to think through gender issues and how services need to be appropriately adapted.
- The absence/patchiness of homelessness forums to bring together statutory and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) agencies.
- Difficulties in covering rural areas where outreach services do not know where women would be located and the areas are too vast to cover.

5.5 Review of data review meeting implementation

17 London boroughs and four areas outside London[61] conducted data review meetings. Census organisers were a key part of organising and leading these. This was a new part of the census and therefore it was expected that not every area was able or felt confident to deliver it. Due to the number of boroughs in London, census organisers requested that each local lead be responsible for their borough's meeting, but the census core team provided guidance and support and offered to help lead each meeting, attending 14 of the 17 London meetings.

The meetings varied in number and type of services attending: some primarily involved homelessness services, but larger meetings hosted a large number of services of different types. Census organisers felt that the meetings with a large range of services benefitted from a diversity of perspectives across lots of engaged services. Data gathering was most effective where organisers had a strong understanding of the purpose of the meetings and familiarity with the process, and where attendees were well-prepared.

Local organisers experienced data review meetings differently: some finding the process easy to follow; others less certain of what needed doing and recording. This was likely to have been for various reasons, including having limited time in the lead up to the meeting, difficulties using and unfamiliarity with the recording spreadsheet, and some organisers engaging with the process, but perhaps not being fully confident with the overall aims and purpose of the meeting. Section 6.6 contains recommendations for adjustments that could be made to the process to make it easier for future censuses.

Observed successes from the London data review meetings:

- Areas where they fully understood the impetus for the data meetings, read the material and attendees prepared in advance. This perhaps also reflected strong relationships in the borough.

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[60] The census team hope that service participation in the census, as well as its results, can lead to better understanding and implementation of solutions and better practices, not least by highlighting these difficulties.
[61] Three areas outside London held one data review meeting each, the other (a county-wide area) held three.

- Areas where they put prior preparation into the data meeting, including combining lists where they knew two or three services worked very closely together and would have a) large numbers and b) significant overlap.
- Where organisers invited many services and many participants attended.
- Where participants suggested actions to try to better support their work with women.
- Even where teams hadn't seen many women in the census, in-depth discussions were held to gather data that helped to put their survey results in context.

Key ingredients for success entail ensuring that:

- Prior to the meetings, organisers had good understanding of what the data meetings were seeking to achieve – so that they made time to engage as many services as possible.
- In the meetings, organisers were clear about the overall aims of the meeting and what to do.
- Services were told well in advance what information to bring.

Immediate gains from participating in the Data Review meetings:

- Qualitative evidence about specific issues affecting services' ability to effectively support women.
- Information on the subtleties between what provision is missing for each borough: for some this was simply accommodation, but for others, accommodation was available, but for a variety of reasons, it wasn't working, or they were missing something else.
- Acknowledgement of the potential to tailor advocacy for different measures to support women both across London and in specific areas.
- Service recognition of the benefit of coming together and clear articulation of what support was needed – particularly for practitioners.
- An opportunity for encouraging services to think about women and their needs.
- The ability to develop a broader picture about women who are being worked with in each locality and how much multi-agency working is taking place, including unrealised opportunities for joint working, where services are working with women who the commissioned teams aren't aware of, or cognisant of the extent to which those services are working with a similar client group.

Longer-term benefits from participating in the whole Census process:

Due to the very hidden nature of women's rough sleeping, bringing cross-sector data and insights together allowed each participating local authority to build a more accurate and inclusive picture of the scale of this issue than would have been possible using the census survey alone. Participating in the census has had significant impacts on various aspects of addressing women's rough sleeping and homelessness for these local authorities, arising from actions taken in response to the results. These benefits are described in detail in Appendix 3, but can be summarised as follows:

1. **Improved Understanding and Local Knowledge:**
   - Participating in the census has enhanced understanding of women's rough sleeping and homelessness, leading to improved outreach efforts and involvement from various sector services and commissioners.

- It has provided insights into patterns of rough sleeping among women, including the types of locations they use and how services can better reach them, and has supported engagement and building relationships with women participating in the census.

2. **Policy and Strategy Development:**
   - Findings from the census have been incorporated into new homelessness strategies and policy responses.
   - Definitions of women's rough sleeping have been refined and adopted, and gender-informed approaches have been integrated into regular outreach patterns.

3. **Enhancing Services and Resources:**
   - The census has catalysed the development of new services tailored to women experiencing homelessness, such as accommodation, winter services, women's spaces, and evening drop-ins.
   - Funding has been allocated for initiatives like respite rooms, therapeutic interventions, and dedicated women's support worker roles within housing support teams.

4. **Training and Capacity Building:**
   - Training on gender-informed working and understanding the specific needs of women experiencing homelessness has been provided to service providers.
   - Service resources have been developed to better explain available support to women, encouraging them to access services.

5. **Partnership and Collaboration:**
   - Participation in the census has strengthened partnerships between services and improved collaboration in addressing women's homelessness.
   - New services have been identified and connected with, improving the ability to refer women into appropriate support.
   - Initiatives like women's rough sleeping action groups have been formed to discuss cases and gather information for better support.

Overall, the census has not only provided valuable data on women's rough sleeping but has also spurred concrete actions and improvements in policies, services and collaboration efforts to address this issue effectively.

Overarching lessons learnt:

Because the data review meetings were newly introduced in 2023, it is worth considering what was learnt in their implementation and whether they should be repeated in future censuses. Observations of the meetings suggest that where organisers and attendees understood the overall purpose of and method for undertaking the data meetings, they worked well and demonstrated that they can be developed further for continued use. Meetings in which there was a limited advance understanding of the process (often due to time constraints), faced more challenges but were still able to produce data and hold an insightful discussion - even if the census organisers had to adapt the process slightly during the meeting. It is therefore legitimate to consider that these data meetings do have value for estimating the scale of women's rough sleeping, but they may need adapting to make them more accessible and easier to achieve. Given that the data meeting methodology was based on the snapshot estimate meetings, it was also interesting to find that meeting organisers across the areas taking part did not seem familiar with the concept or process.

6. Recommendations

The women's rough sleeping census – particularly the joint outreach work – provides a useful focus for strengthening working links across all sectors that support women who are (at risk of) rough sleeping. This is fundamentally important, given the unlikelihood of outreach teams being able to reach all women by themselves. Like the 2022 census, the outreach and other census activity conducted in 2023 were successful in reaching women not previously known to outreach teams. In recognition of the fact that a snapshot count alone will always fall short of identifying all women who are sleeping rough, in 2023 data review meetings were also introduced. These review meetings confirmed that in many participating locations, the census alone did not record all the women known by local outreach teams to be rough sleeping. As a result, we recommend that these two data collection methods – the census and the data review meetings – are both necessary to improve the accuracy of estimating the scale of women's rough sleeping and present a more comprehensive data picture than that which exists currently.

Many local areas reported how their involvement in the 2023 Census enhanced their ways of working around women's rough sleeping – whether in relation to improving existing services, developing new services, advancing their outreach provision or strengthening partnership working. Such benefits are important for organisations that have not yet participated in the census to consider.

The 2023 census has been especially important for being able to concretely challenge current misconceptions about the low level of women's rough sleeping. This work has confirmed what lived experience accounts and previous research has pointed to: that the scale of women's rough sleeping, as detailed in the Rough Sleeping Snapshot or CHAIN data, are considerably underestimated. This means that current commissioning decisions, determining provision for women who are rough sleeping based on those data sources, will be significantly under-resourcing services. As highlighted in the discussion section, the 2023 data review meeting estimates suggest that there may be roughly 9 times as much female rough sleeping than the Annual Snapshot suggests and almost double that suggested by the CHAIN 2023/24 estimates.

These findings provide impetus for a concerted focus on addressing women's rough sleeping as essential for ending rough sleeping for good. To close this report, we therefore turn to recommendations for the future -- including additional research required to continue to improve policy and service provision for women experiencing rough sleeping across England.

6.1   Recommendations for central government

- The next rough sleeping strategy should include data, learning and recommendations arising from the women's rough sleeping censuses 2022 and 2023. This should include:
  1. A cross-departmental commitment to understanding women's rough sleeping as an experience synonymous with violence, abuse and poor health outcomes, with resulting instructions on how services within related sectors should identify and respond to women experiencing rough sleeping.
  2. Prevention and intervention measures informed by women's experiences of and the trajectory of homelessness, which involves gradual deterioration into rough sleeping with resulting high levels of need requiring specialist services.

- The government should create a dedicated function to lead on women's rough sleeping, including overseeing the rollout of the women's rough sleeping census and related practice change work nationally.

- The government should resource and lead on delivery of the women's rough sleeping census to support and encourage all local authorities to deliver the census. This should include:
  1. A funded role to lead on coordinating the women's rough sleeping census, as with the government's other forms of data collection.
  2. Functions to collect data from the census so that the government can review and report on the results nationally, as with the government's forms of data collection.
  3. Guidance and resources on how to deliver an annual women's rough sleeping census and how to conduct gender-informed outreach created and disseminated to all local authorities.

- Government rough sleeping advisors should support and assist local authorities in developing their approaches to identifying and responding to women's rough sleeping in their locality, including by encouraging them to undertake the census.

- The government should update existing resources, advice and practices to include gender-informed measures and approaches. This should include information on the gendered differences in rough sleeping; updating the current definition of rough sleeping to include the experiences of women; and outlining and encouraging use of gender-informed practices to accurately identify and respond to women's rough sleeping.

- The government should enable local authorities to end the need for 'verification' of someone as rough sleeping as a requirement for accessing support and accommodation services.

- All government data collected on rough sleeping including the Ending Rough Sleeping Data Framework should report on gender and be subject to an equalities impact assessment to ensure that the data collection methods used are inclusive of how women and marginalised groups experience rough sleeping.

- The government should undertake a cost-benefit analysis of long-term unresolved women's rough sleeping compared to early and tailored interventions.

6.2   Recommendations for local authorities and commissioners

- Local authorities should undertake a women's rough sleeping census annually in order to get a more accurate and inclusive understanding of how many women are sleeping rough in their area, and subsequently use the findings (and other relevant research) to inform their strategic, funding and commissioning decisions on women's homelessness.

- Local authorities should undertake both the census survey and data meeting elements of the census where possible. Where this is not possible due to resource, local authorities should undertake the element of the census that they are most able to.

- Local authorities should re-assess their outreach practices and access to services in relation to learning from the census, including:

1. Local authorities should adopt the gender-informed definition of rough sleeping.
2. Accommodation services, including those funded by DLUHC's Rough Sleeping Initiative, should accept women without needing them to be 'verified' or seen bedded down.
3. Greater investment in assertive outreach to better meet the safeguarding needs of women experiencing rough sleeping.
4. Outreach practices should be gender-informed and teams should conduct standalone gender-informed shifts. These would be likely to include variations to shift times, locations visited, joint shifts with specialist services such as women's and health services. Shifts should be informed by knowledge about the local area.

- Local authorities should develop localised cross-departmental strategies to respond to women's rough sleeping with a 'no wrong door' approach. These strategies should be jointly held across homelessness, health, VAWG departments in recognition of the multi-faceted challenges women experience when rough sleeping and the importance of a consistent, tangible cross-sector response.

- Improved support and referral pathways are needed to address the true level of need, ensuring clear, safe, and effective pathways for women. Pathways should include intensive support, women's spaces and accommodation. Accommodation pathways should have a range of options to respond to different levels of need and support required, should address the physical and psychological safety needs of women, and should be responsive to women's particular experiences and risks.

- Local authorities and commissioners should urgently attend to the safety of existing services and when commissioning new services, whether services are women-only or mixed.

- Local authorities should seize opportunities to develop a stronger preventative approach to women's rough sleeping. As part of this, hostels, refuges and supported housing should have outcomes to reflect improved usage of bedspaces and increased understanding about where women sleep when not at the service, as a means of preventing rough sleeping.

6.3   Recommendations for services working with women who sleep rough

- Services should prioritise meeting women's immediate needs – especially those relating to their safety - as standard practice. Every contact matters, and a cross-sector 'no wrong door' policy should be adopted, recognising that women's likely high risk and lack of visibility makes it crucial to respond whenever they are identified as rough sleeping.

- Services should introduce gender-informed practices, including:
1. Adoption of a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping and removing the need to be seen bedded down in order to access support.
2. Recruiting women's specialist roles.
3. Outreach teams should deliver gender-informed shifts, including changing times and locations of shifts, and ensuring women are present during the shift.
4. Ensuring a gender balance of staff, particularly within outreach teams to ensure there is capacity to carry out gender-informed outreach shifts.
5. Services should deliver or support joint outreach shifts to increase the ability of services to reach women.

- Services should have a safe (off street) space to speak to women; recognising the increased chance of and responding swiftly to high risk. It is crucial to attend to the issue of physical and psychological safety when delivering women's rough sleeping and other homelessness services, including improving the safety of existing services.

- Services should increase their partnership working between homeless services and other community services, particularly specialist VAWG services. Partnership working should seek to: (1) share knowledge and skills around gender- and trauma-informed approaches among all teams, and (2) improve onward referrals and support for women who are rough sleeping. Joint outreach between services is a valuable approach – especially where that spreads awareness of how to conduct gender-informed outreach and allows for female staff to be part of the outreach team. (See further Appendix 2).

- Services should increase their understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping amongst their frontline staff, operational managers, commissioners and policy makers and across multiple sectors. This can be achieved, for example, through training, introducing gender-informed approaches, and widespread participation in the census.

Future census delivery

There is value and importance in continuing the Women's Rough Sleeping Census, given the impact it can have at a strategic level and in locally delivered work to end rough sleeping and homelessness: this section will therefore look at recommendations for future delivery of the census.

This includes recommendations and suggestions for local authorities, services and delivery partners taking part in the census, and recommendations for further development work to be undertaken by census organisers.

6.4   Recommendations for census implementation and delivery

- The census – including both the week of data collection and the data review meetings – has proved itself to generate valuable insight into women's rough sleeping. As such, our first recommendation is for the government to support and resource a national roll-out.

- Given the growth in returns from locations completing the census for the second year, we strongly encourage local authorities and other services to commit to repeating the census each year, as a means of increasing identification of the locations where women tend to rough sleep.

- There is a need to strengthen partnership working and secure both resource and practical commitment from key organisations, including statutory services. Ideally, as many partners as possible should be fully involved in organising and delivering both the census and the data meeting. Coordination of the census would benefit from beginning sooner to allow for the involvement of all appropriate partners in both its organisation and delivery. Agreeing shared responsibility, including reporting to monthly progress meetings, could increase accountability and raise awareness of the key roles that all services and the local authority can play in delivering the census, ensuring that delivery and also learning is shared across a range of parties. Having local authority or senior representatives from statutory partners lead on the census could be key to getting buy-in and supporting effective delivery.

- Census teams need to comprise diverse staff as minority ethnic (particularly Arab) groups are underrepresented among census respondents. This could be due to the discomfort engaging with staff, language barriers or lack of staff knowledge on where and how to reach particular demographic groups.

- Outreach services in rural areas could benefit from working closely with partner agencies who have reach into more remote communities.

- Services participating in census outreach should consider recording where each woman was found/interviewed for their own use, to inform future outreach locations.
- Each local authority should consider creating guidance for teams in supporting and collecting details about the women met during the census for the purposes of providing support afterwards, if the woman provides her consent.

- More training should be provided for those collecting/entering data from paper survey forms, to ensure that standardised responses are adhered to and data supplied by women can therefore be included in analysis.

- The national census organisers should conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the census in local areas to help to illustrate potential outcomes and impact of delivering the census, based on the successful participation in the census so far.

6.5 Recommendations for future census questions

- There should be limited flexibility for local areas to adapt the census questions to ensure robust analysis and consistency of results, Whilst areas should be allowed to **add** 2-3 questions for enhancing local insight, **no changes should be made to either the questions or the response options** for the core questions.

- Data collection design by national census organisers could be adapted to support examination of any relationship between the length or commonality of women's rough sleeping and the number of services they access - to see whether there is a general pattern of women engaging with fewer (or more) services as they experience more rough sleeping. This is important in order to establish the degree of priority needed for 'no wrong door' policies that would maximise engagement with women at risk of, or in the early stages of rough sleeping.

- National and local census organisers should involve more women with lived experience of homelessness in planning the census (and all participating sites should record the number of women with lived experience involved in the planning phase).

- National census organisers should give clarity on ethnicity categories for White- Gypsy Irish Traveller; White – Roma; Gypsy Romany Irish Traveller.

- The national census organisers may wish to consider adding questions about the reasons behind women's rough sleeping.

- Borough census teams should keep a tally of how many rough sleeping women declined to participate in the survey.

6.6 Recommendations for future data review meetings

- Local areas should consider having an initial data review meeting before the census to build working partnerships and ensure that each organisation understands the need and time required to prepare information for the final meeting.

- The national census team should seek to make the data meeting form more self-explanatory.

- Guidance and resources should be updated so that local areas record the numbers of new women that each service learn about at the final data review meeting.

- The national census team should continue to collate and disseminate information about how areas have been able to improve provision for women who are sleeping rough as a result of participating in the census and Data Review meetings.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census provides further evidence of all the different ways in which women rough sleep, including spending time within unsafe accommodation, such as acquaintances'/strangers' homes etc., and of how important it is to count this as rough sleeping. Both the census survey and the Data Review Meetings have identified substantially higher numbers of rough sleeping women than current snapshots and (in London) CHAIN. This reveals how the current government definition of rough sleeping excludes and therefore undercounts women, with serious implications for the commissioning and resourcing of effective homelessness services for that cater for women's specific needs.

In contradiction to the 2023 rough sleeping snapshot that suggests women constitute only 15% of the rough sleeping population, the data review meetings held as part of the 2023 census reveal that the actual number of women who experience rough sleeping could be at eight to nine times higher than snapshot estimates, and in London double the CHAIN estimates. This highlights the value of taking a gender-informed approach to estimating the scale of women's rough sleeping. The 2023 census also provides evidence that undertaking both the survey and the data review meetings allows for more women to be identified than is possible by using only one of these two research methods.

In addition, this census indicates the scale of women in homelessness accommodation who subsequently move into rough sleeping, often because they feel unsafe in current provision (as well as a lack of appropriate support and other unsuitability factors). This is a crucial consideration for commissioners and providers of women's homelessness services.

The Department for Levelling Up. Housing and Communities committed to ending rough sleeping by 2024 and whilst this target has and will not be reached in 2024, it is crucial it remains a future target. 2023 saw a 27% increase in rough sleeping from 2022, according to the Rough Sleeping Snapshot, and although the government's Everyone In policy during the pandemic had significant success, with the removal of these measures rough sleeping has seen a 60% rise since 2021. It should also be noted that Everyone In was not as effective or safe for women and did not consider their needs[62].

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[62] The Kerslake Commission on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping. 2021. *A new way of working: ending rough sleeping together.* Final report September 2021. https://www.commissiononroughsleeping.org/2021-report/

The aim to end rough sleeping is a vital one that we must reassert, and through a lens of equality: rough sleeping can only end for good if everyone's needs and experiences are considered. Learning from the women's rough sleeping census informs the need for a concerted focus on women, as well as providing understanding and solutions for addressing women's rough sleeping through tailored, safe and effective responses. Such responses could not only end rough sleeping for women but also reveal potential effective methods for ending rough sleeping for everyone.

Next steps

This report will be used to inform the future work of the census, in its further development and ongoing resulting work on addressing women's rough sleeping. This report has demonstrated the findings of delivering the census in several different areas across England which vary in size, environment, population and governance. We hope this report and these findings will not only be used by census organisers and participating local authorities, but by anyone looking to further their work in rough sleeping: as one of the biggest datasets on women's rough sleeping, this data provides an impetus and evidence base for a concerted focus on women's rough sleeping, at both a strategic and service delivery level.

The census team will be coordinating the next census in autumn 2024 and will be encouraging new local and combined authorities to take part, as well as encouraging existing participants to repeat the census. The census team will also be using the findings and ongoing census work to call on the government to commit to looking more closely at women's rough sleeping and homelessness.

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Appendix 1

London Women's Rough Sleeping Census 2023

Online survey link https://forms.office.com/e/sinR8Z1nTH

What is the survey for?
We're conducting research to get a better understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping and having nowhere safe to stay, and to help improve support and services for women.

We have 10 short questions to ask you - it takes less than 10 minutes to complete and is entirely voluntary. You are welcome to answer all or just some of the questions if you prefer.

Do you want to take part?
Rough sleeping can look different for everyone, especially for women. In this survey, rough sleeping means that sometimes you have nowhere safe to go at night, or nowhere to go at all. When that happens, you might sleep outside or in a stairwell or somewhere hidden, or you might walk around all night, or sit on transport, in a station or in McDonald's all night. You might also stay with friends or strangers and have to leave quickly and have nowhere else to go, or you might be sex working and don't have anywhere to stay. You might move between different places and circumstances, perhaps sometimes staying in accommodation and sometimes staying outside or on transport.

Is this something you've experienced within the last three months? If so, would you like to complete the survey? To note, this survey is open to all women and people who feel the gender themes of this survey apply to them.

How will we use your data?
Your data will be pseudonymised and you don't need to tell us your name. Researchers will collect the results and write a report about the numbers of women who completed the survey and their answers. We will use this information to ask for better support and accommodation services for women who are rough sleeping.

We have a leaflet about how we will use your data which I can read out and give to you.
Thank you for your time.

About your recent experience of homelessness

In this section, we will ask about your recent experiences of housing and homelessness. This is to help us understand patterns of rough sleeping and how to support people. We won't be able to identify where you are rough sleeping from your answers and your answers will be anonymised.

1. **When did you last sleep rough?**
   By sleeping rough we mean having nowhere to go at night. You might not do this every night, and sleeping rough might not mean sleeping outside. (Worker refer to definition to help give examples.)
   Select one option

Last night	In the last 3 months
In the last week	Question not answered
In the last month	Question not asked

2. **Approximately how many nights have you slept rough in the last 3 months?**
This doesn't have to be an exact number. Select one option

1 night

2-5 nights

6-10 nights

11-20 nights

21- 30 nights

More than 30 nights

More than 60 nights

Every night

Questioned not answered

Question not asked

3. Where have you stayed or slept in the last 3 months? Select all that apply

Slept outside on the street
At a bus or train station
On a bus or a train
Walked around all night
McDonald's or similar
A&E waiting room
In a car
In a squat
Slept rough - other (please describe)

_____

_____

In hospital
In custody
With a friend

With a relative
With a stranger/new acquaintance
Night shelter
Homelessness service (hostel/supported housing)
B&B/ hotel/ temporary accommodation
Refuge accommodation
Housed – owned, rented or social rented
Question not answered
Question not asked
Other (please describe)

_____

_____

_____

4. Where were you staying most recently before sleeping rough? Select one option

Sofa surfing
Hostel (with no support)
Supported housing (e.g. hostel with support)
Refuge accommodation
Asylum accommodation
Emergency accommodation
Other temporary accommodation from the council
Private rented sector housing
Social rented housing

Home owned by respondent/ close family/ partner
In another country
Prison
Hospital
Caravan
Question not answered
Question not asked
Other (please describe)

_____

_____

5. Which services are you currently accessing support from?
(Prompt for worker: if respondent is uncertain which category their service falls into, try to establish this with them and select the most relevant option/s).
Select all that apply

Homelessness organisation
Housing officer or council housing department
Housing association
Drug or alcohol support service
Health service
Women's centre/service
Domestic abuse or sexual violence support service
One-stop shop
Food bank
Soup kitchen
Job Centre
Citizen's Advice

Social worker/ social services
Police
Probation
Prison service
Religious or faith group / church, mosque or temple
Education
None
Question not answered
Question not asked
Other (please describe)

_____

_____

_____

About you

Thank you for the information you've shared. To help us understand about the people who are responding to this survey, we'd like to ask some questions about you. This includes your age, ethnicity, and gender - this is to help us understand how different people experience rough sleeping. Each question has an option not to answer, or to give an answer which we may not have provided as an option.

6. **How old were you on your last birthday?** _____

   If you prefer not to answer, please leave this question blank.
   (Prompt for worker: please follow your usual safeguarding processes if respondent is under 18).

7. **How would you describe your ethnicity?**

   Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi

   Asian or Asian British – Chinese

   Asian or Asian British – Indian

   Asian or Asian British – Pakistani

   Asian or Asian British – other

   Black or Black British – African

   Black or Black British – Caribbean

   Black or Black British – other

   Mixed White and Asian

   Mixed White and Black – African

   Mixed White and Black – Caribbean

   Mixed – other

   White – British

   White – Irish

   White – Other

   White – Gypsy Irish Traveller

   White – Roma

   Gypsy Romany Irish Traveller

   Arab

   Prefer not to say

   Question not answered

   Question not asked

   I prefer to self-describe here:

   _____

   _____

   _____

8. **What is your gender?**
   This survey is open to all women and people who relate to the gender themes of this survey in their experience of homelessness. If your gender isn't included in the options, please self-describe below.

   Woman

   Man

   Non-binary

   Gender fluid

   Questioning

   Prefer not to say

   Question not answered

   Question not asked

   I prefer to self-describe here:

   _____

   _____

   _____

9. **Is your gender the same as registered at birth?**

   Yes

   No

   Prefer not to say

   Question not answered

   Question not asked

   If you would like to add anything about how this has impacted your experience of rough sleeping, you are welcome to do so here. _____

   _____

10. Has someone at this service or another service already asked you these same questions this week or in the last few days?
We ask this question to make sure our research is as accurate as possible. It's ok if you've already answered this survey this week, but it's important for us to record it.

Yes
No   Question not answered
Don't know   Question not asked

This is the last question on the form, thank you very much for your time.

Questions for people conducting the census (staff and volunteers)

This section is only for the worker filling in the form - the respondent does not need to answer questions in this section.

1. What type of service do you deliver? _____

2. Which borough is your service in? _____

If your service operates in more than one borough, please answer as relevant to this survey response, i.e. where you conducted this survey or the area where the respondent was most recently rough sleeping.

3. Date survey was conducted _____

4. How did you conduct the survey?

At your service (in person or on the   On another outreach shift
phone)   Other (please describe)
On a gender-informed census outreach
shift   _____

                                                  _____

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell us? (for staff/volunteers)

Do not include identifying or personal information here. Please only include information which is relevant to this survey.

_____
_____
_____
_____

Note for worker: for security of data, a paper version of the survey should only be used if you are not able to use the online survey (for example, no access to internet or device). Please transfer answers to the online survey platform as soon as possible if using the paper form, and shred or delete any information recorded outside the online survey platform. Surveys dated after 1ˢᵗ October or submitted online later than 4ᵗʰ October 2023 will not be included in the final report.

Appendix 2

How to embed a gender-informed approach in everyday outreach

In the course of undertaking the 2023 Women's Rough Sleeping Census, it became apparent that areas had to make a concerted effort to change practice to reach women during the census week. This highlighted that traditional outreach work and established methods of recording rough sleeping are not sufficiently identifying women – and that their needs are not being met by service commissioning/design that relies on current underestimates of the scale of women's rough sleeping.

In order to better identify and understand women's rough sleeping, it is imperative that a broad range of services working with women adopt gender-informed outreach approaches. This entails:

1. Increasing recognition and understanding of women's experiences of rough sleeping – among first line staff, operational managers, commissioners and policy makers.
2. Expanding partnership working – so that all organisations working with women who may experience rough sleeping come together: sharing knowledge and skills around gender and trauma informed approaches for all outreach teams as standard practice.
3. Adopting a gender-informed definition of rough sleeping and inserting terms into contracts which commit teams to adopting gender-informed outreach – including the implementation of some daytime shifts every week.
4. Increasing capacity to carry out gender-informed outreach - i.e. through recruiting female outreach workers/volunteers to support with its implementation.
5. Prioritising meeting women's immediate support needs on a day-to-day basis.
6. Creating better support and referral pathways for women – including accommodation pathways that cater to the physical and psychological safety needs of women and are sensitive to the way women have to live their lives (e.g. eliminating accommodation curfew rules that exclude women who are sex working).

Participation in the Women's Rough Sleeping Census has improved partnership working and led to many other positive developments for several local areas. Appendix 3 summarises these benefits, which include improvements in existing services, the development of new services, enhanced outreach and increased partnership working.

Appendix 3

<u>Women's Rough Sleeping Census – local impacts (5 months post-census)</u>

Overall impacts that doing the census can have:

- Improves understanding of women's rough sleeping and homelessness just by taking part in the process - outreach, other sector services involved, commissioners.
- Improve local knowledge of patterns of rough sleeping for women in the area (including types of locations used by women), how services might be able to reach them, and which services are already working with women.
- Numbers providing a better picture of women's rough sleeping locally, to sit alongside other existing data.
- Emphasis and evidence of the need for taking further steps – putting women's homelessness on the agenda at all levels (which many areas often report to be difficult).

Summary of what's already happened in areas that have taken part:

- Inclusion of findings in new homelessness strategy and policy responses
- Adopting a definition of women's rough sleeping
- Introducing gender-informed and multi-agency shifts into regular outreach patterns
- Funding for and starting new services for women and roles to support women: accommodation, winter services, women's spaces, evening drop-in, navigators.
- Reviews of current provision and capacity based on census evidence of need.
- Developing resources and training to help services better support women.
- Improved relationships across services and between outreach and women's cohort, increased trust of services for women.

More detail on what participating areas have told us about how the census has already impacted their work (recorded early 2024):

Outreach changes:

- Adopted broader definition of women's rough sleeping and are using this for verification practices.
- Identified new locations for regular outreach and developing better relationships with staff in those relevant services to enable them to contact the team about anyone they're concerned about.
- Identified better outreach shift times and approaches for reaching women.
- Creating a toolkit for outreach workers on gender-informed working.
- Expanded cohorts which can be supported by navigators, ensuring more women are represented on the caseload. Engagement between navigators and women improved.
- Relationship improved between outreach teams and women's cohort, with census having acted as an icebreaker for engagement. Women more trusting of outreach teams. (Several areas reported this improvement in relationship between workers and women involved in the census).
- Piloting gender-informed changes, shifts, and verification processes.
- Partnership shifts seeking to target women rough sleeping.

- Outreach spec being rewritten to ensure it is gender-informed and inclusive of women's homelessness, going into detail about how the service will support women.

Strategies, policies, training and improving existing services

- Report/findings being including in new homelessness strategy and informing training offer on VAWG across the county. Providing training on PIE with a gendered lens, particularly around speaking to and understanding residents around behaviour etc.
- Developed a policy response with 15 recommendations, and changes to make as a result including service redesign, changes to outreach team, and partnership working. Embedding these into commissioning practices as well.
- Created service resources for women to better explain what their services can offer them (to encourage women to access support).
- Developing a toolkit on gender-informed working in general.
- Informing discussions on gendered pathways for women and multi-agency response.
- Amendments to KPIs and data collection to ensure they reflect gender of clients.
- Conducting a deep dive into individual cases to better understand experiences and changes needed.
- Informed a focus on older women in one area.
- Overarching benefit that census has got gendered homelessness responses onto the agenda at strategic and operational levels, including on partnership boards.

New services/funding:

- Subregional long-term accommodation service for women experiencing multiple disadvantage approved, funded and started due to data from census.
- New women's space co-created with women with lived experience.
- Setting up women's shared house. This offer for women was created following census evidencing need for response for women similar to a new men's shelter being set up in the area.
- Additional local winter funds used to provide evening winter service for women. Thinking about setting up a corresponding men's offer in order to allow women with partners to attend – as some women are being prevented by partners.
- Running focus groups with women who took part in the census to understand what's missing from current service offers.
- Used in new funding bids which are waiting to hear outcomes, including for respite rooms pilot for women.
- Included results in SHAP gap analysis and proposal for women-only accommodation - approved first stage so far.
- Received funding via RSI to deliver a weekly women's drop in, building on the multi-agency work of the census - now being delivered, and funding for therapeutic interventions.
- Funding received for evening drop in for women – campaigning for need for this project for number of years and census data provided final ingredient to get it approved.
- Role funded and created for dedicated women's support worker in housing support team.
- Access to emergency accommodation/amount available to women being reviewed as a result of the census.

Partnership working:

- The census has helped forge new and better relationships between services due to participation of partners in the census and has helped their understanding of outreach work.

- Learned of and connected with new services which can support women in their area, and which services have women only drop ins.
- Improved ability to link and refer women into statutory and voluntary services.
- Better recognition of silo working between outreach and women's support which area is now looking to address.
- Trialling a women's rough sleeping action group to discuss cases and gather info.