Women's Rough Sleeping Census Manifesto for Change:
Five steps for tackling women's rough sleeping in the Mayor's London Plan of Action

solace

shp Single Homeless Project

Women's experiences of rough sleeping involve high levels of violence and abuse, keeping out of sight and often avoiding sleeping visibly on the streets. Many women are further marginalised by the structural, systemic and service level barriers that impact Black and minoritised and migrant women, and women who identify as LGBTQ+. London's practices and services for supporting people experiencing rough sleeping are based on data that doesn't recognise and account for these experiences because they are predominantly designed around how men sleep rough. Women are remaining homeless and not being reached by services, and there is an **urgent need for a new approach**.

> " I have been in fear for my life and stunned by the lack of housing for women. Having somewhere safe to sleep, something consistent, means life or death; it really does. "

Women's Rough Sleeping Census

The Women's Rough Sleeping Census takes place each year to build evidence of the scale of need, understand experiences, and identify what will be effective for women.

Following the **third annual women's rough sleeping census** across London in 2024, the census has now heard the voices and experiences of almost 1,000 women, telling us *how*, *when* and *where* they rough sleep. This comprehensive body of data confirms that:

1. Women often sleep rough in ways that are not seen or validated by current methods.
2. The number of women sleeping rough in London is significantly higher than previously evidenced.

This means that current commissioning decisions **significantly under-resource services for women**. Examples of poor experiences of rough sleeping services include:

- not being found by outreach teams offering support.
- being excluded from the criteria for accommodation services.
- lack of support for high-risk violence and abuse.
- unsafe services and accommodation.
- insufficient provision for the number of women experiencing rough sleeping.

Women's rough sleeping is a complex societal problem that goes beyond rough sleeping and homelessness. It is a safeguarding and domestic abuse issue, a critical health issue, and, as the census has shown in relation to existing practices, an equality issue.

Five steps for tackling women's rough sleeping in the Mayor's London Plan of Action
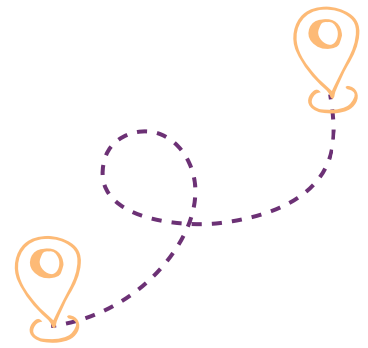
The Mayor is currently writing a new Rough Sleeping Plan of Action.

The last Plan of Action highlighted a difference in the needs of women, yet **the problems have not changed**. Over the last three years, the census has accumulated a wealth of evidence from women and practitioners across London that can inform the new plan.

The census team has created five clear steps for tackling women's rough sleeping in the capital city. We ask that the Mayor incorporate these into the new London Plan of Action and work with us to develop and deliver on these steps.

The five key steps

1. Definition
2. Data
3. Equity and Safety
4. Integration
5. Prevention and Intervention

Definition: Make London's rough sleeping response configured around an understanding of how women experience rough sleeping.

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Challenge

"The 2023 census provides data from over 800 women across England describing their recent experiences of rough sleeping. This reveals that women's experiences of rough sleeping tend to be hidden, transient and intermittent and that both the locations and how women sleep rough frequently fall outside of the Government's definition of rough sleeping."
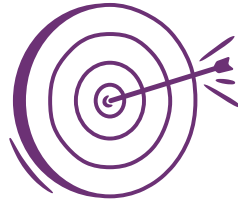
Women Rough Sleeping Census 2023

> ❝ I was scared to sleep outside in case anything bad happened to me. I think a lot of girls choose random places to stay, and there are a lot of homeless women. ❞

Proposal for the London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action:

1. Set out a gender-informed understanding of how women experience rough sleeping which considers the intersectional experiences of women. It can be used in all London boroughs to guide outreach practice and ensure access to rough sleeping support and accommodation.

Data: All London local authorities must gather accurate and inclusive data on women's rough sleeping.

Challenge

"Many system-related factors trap women in rough sleeping. For example, data collection and verification processes do not effectively capture women's experiences, resulting in inadequately funded services."

Women Rough Sleeping Census 2023

> **There should be somewhere women can go to present. You don't know who to go to until you get told but when you're hidden homeless and not bedding down, people can't find you.**

Proposal for the London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action:

1. Incorporate a clear commitment to supporting all London boroughs in undertaking an annual women's rough sleeping census and reporting on their findings.
2. Review and reconfigure existing data collection methods and systems so that women are accurately represented, including Black and minoritised women.

Equity and safety: London's commissioned rough sleeping services and systems are equitable, accessible and safe for women.

Challenge

"Women's experiences of rough sleeping are not being provided for by current policies, strategies, funding models, definitions and practices."
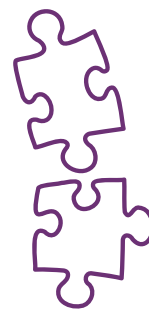
Women Rough Sleeping Census 2023

> **Many drop-ins seem to prefer to cater for homeless men and don't really see women's homelessness as an issue. You get the feeling that, as a woman, your homelessness is your own fault.**

Proposal for the London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action:

1. Detail how it and resulting measures will meet the needs of all groups, including women of different ages, migrant women, LGBTQ+ people, and Black and minoritised women.
2. Commit to co-creating a gender-informed equalities impact assessment, which can be used to assess and improve all rough sleeping services and provisions and ensure safety and equity of access for women, including the GLA's programme of services.
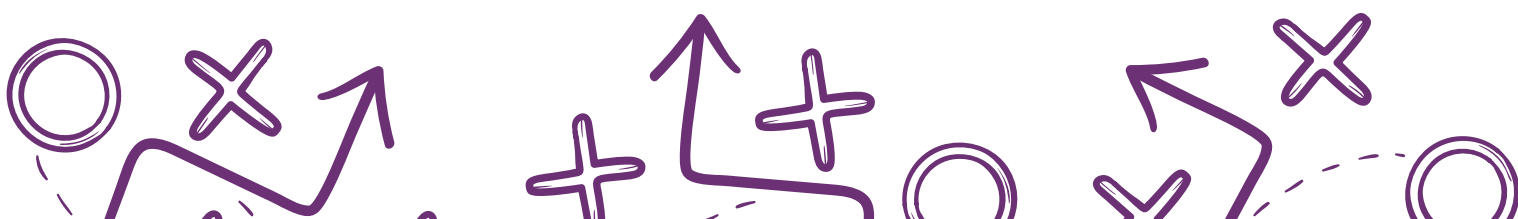
Integration: Sectors supported and represented by departments in the GLA must integrate and develop cross-sector strategies, pathways and practices that help women experiencing rough sleeping to access housing and support as quickly as possible—no matter where in the system they present.

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Challenge

"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 to another service."

Women Rough Sleeping Census 2023

> **I am struggling to keep safe and warm. I am pregnant and not able to get to appointments.**

Proposal for the London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action:

1. Ensure its measures are linked with those of other London-wide and mayoral-led strategies, including, for example, the Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation strategy.
2. Set out measures to establish an integrated women's homelessness pathway in all London boroughs, building on the learning from the two boroughs piloting the women's census cross-sector approach and including VAWG and specialist 'by and for' organisations.

Prevention and intervention: Ensure that women are provided with the information and resources they need so they don't have to spend a night rough sleeping and can access safe services designed for their needs.

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Challenge

"A significant number of women who took part in the 2023 census reported that they had been experiencing homelessness in another form before rough sleeping, and a third of women reported that they had been in some form of homelessness accommodation before rough sleeping. This is of considerable concern, as it demonstrates that the accommodation offered to women to resolve their homelessness is either not sustainable or not suitable for their needs."

Women Rough Sleeping Census 2023

Proposal for the London Rough Sleeping Plan of Action:

1. Commit to resourcing 24-hour women's hubs in each London subregion where women can present, self-refer or be referred by any agency and immediately be given a safe place to spend the night, access housing advice and support, VAWG and health support, and a longer-term housing plan.
2. Set out measures to establish an integrated women's homelessness pathway in all London boroughs, ensuring that this pathway includes sufficient, safe and specialist support and accommodation for women rough sleeping in London.
3. Dedicate resources to understand and respond to the gaps between rough sleeping provision, statutory housing provision, VAWG, and refuge provision.