



# Wise in 5: Rough sleeping and national strategies to end it

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Abolish priority need	Piloting Housing First	Statutory duty to prevent homelessness	Commitment to ending rough sleeping
England		+		+
Northern Ireland		+		+
Republic of Ireland		+		+
Scotland	+	+	?	+
Wales	?	+	+	+
Key	+ In effect - Yes	💡 Proposed	? Considered	

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## Overview



The [Office for National Statistics](#) defines people who are rough-sleeping as “People sleeping, about to bed down or bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). 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).”

The most extreme and visible type of homelessness is that of people who are sleeping on the streets of our nations.

Homelessness has a wide definition that includes anyone who does not have access to safe and secure housing; people who are experiencing “hidden homelessness”, staying temporarily with friends or sofa surfing. Governments across the nations of Britain and Ireland have developed different policy and legislative approaches to tackling this challenge, and differ in their definitions and data collection.

The fact that we have people sleeping on the streets of the UK and Ireland is generally agreed as an issue, although there is less consensus about the causes and the solutions. For the individuals themselves the impact is catastrophic with a life expectancy of [mid-40s](#) and a far greater and deadly risk of being a victim of assault and mental and physical health problems.

Within the UK, it is complex to build a four-administration [picture of rough sleeping](#) because devolved policies on rough sleeping and homelessness vary, and each administration is responsible for producing statistics that meet their national needs.

## Pandemic measures

At the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, [all governments responded](#) with emergency measures to move people off the streets, providing [additional funding and resources](#) to stay safe during the pandemic, with emergency accommodation offered to 407 people in Wales, 61 in Northern Ireland and 5,400 in England ([90% of rough sleepers in England](#)). In Scotland, although action was taken, no equivalent data collection occurred.

## Priority need

Currently in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is legislation which states that some applicants for homelessness assistance have a priority need for accommodation. Scotland do not test for priority need and there is a [consultation](#) underway in Wales to abolish the priority need test (closing January 2024).

Applicants who have priority need for housing include households with dependent children or a pregnant woman, people who are homeless because of fire or flood, particularly vulnerable because of ill health, disability, old age, as a result of having been in custody or care, or having become homeless because of violence or the threat of violence.

## Housing First

Housing First is a cross-nation scheme that aims to deliver settled accommodation with in-built support for people who have multiple and complex needs and a history of rough sleeping and repeat homelessness. It is recognised [internationally](#) as good practice for people with high support needs who might otherwise have struggled to prove 'tenancy readiness'.

## Criminal Justice Bill 2023-24

The criminalisation of people who are rough sleeping is a method used by authorities to prevent people sleeping in private or public property (such as shop doorways or parks). The powers to force people to move on, issue fines or detain currently falls under the [Vagrancy Act 1824](#) for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Following campaigning by lobby groups, voluntary sector and MPs this Act is now to be [repealed](#) and replaced by [section 81 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#) and the [Criminal Justice Bill 2023-24](#).

According to the [House of Commons library](#) The Criminal Justice Bill 2023 "would create nuisance rough sleeping directions, nuisance rough sleeping prevention notices, and nuisance rough sleeping orders". It would lead to a fine or imprisonment if "a person is or appears to be sleeping rough or intending to, and that person does "something that is a nuisance". The campaign group, Crisis claims "[These proposals simply punish people for being homeless](#)".



# Nation by Nation

## England

The [Rough sleeping snapshot in England](#) estimated that 3,069 people were **sleeping rough** in 2022 on a single night in Autumn across England, up by **26%** from 2021.

In September 2022 the then UK Government announced a joint-Ministerial strategy Ending Rough Sleeping for Good which contained a **£2bn investment over the next three years, including £500m for the Rough Sleeping Initiative** over the next three years.

The strategy includes a focus on joining systems to provide the most effective support to people sleeping rough. This includes ensuring new local Integrated Care Systems take account of the health and social care needs of people sleeping rough, and exhausting options 'within the law' to support non-UK nationals experiencing rough sleeping. The Night Shelter Transformation Fund will increase provision of quality single-room provision within the night shelter sector.

Preventative measures are included for people at particular risk of experiencing homelessness, including adults experiencing severe multiple disadvantages, young people (under 25) who are at risk of, or already experiencing, rough sleeping, young people leaving children's homes, people leaving prison and people with issues related to substance abuse.

Funding is included for pilots of the [Housing First model](#) Liverpool, Greater Manchester, and the West Midlands until 2025.

The strategy outlines the UK Government's plans to roll out a new data-led framework to measure rough sleeping, developed with the [Centre for Homelessness Impact](#). £12m will be committed to the Test and Learn programme to trial innovative approaches and test what works in reducing homelessness and rough sleeping.

## Northern Ireland

According to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive rough-sleeper count, a **total** of 33 people were estimated to be rough sleeping in Northern Ireland in 2022.

On 23rd March 2022 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive published [Ending Homelessness Together](#) which aims to ensure that households experiencing homelessness are supported to find suitable accommodation and support solutions as quickly as possible.

This Strategy aims to ensure a cross departmental and inter agency approach to ending homelessness through a number of objectives; prioritising homelessness prevention, securing sustainable accommodation and appropriate support solutions for homeless households. It also seeks to further understand and address the complexities of chronic homelessness across Northern Ireland and to monitor the existing and emerging need to inform the ongoing development of appropriate services.

## Scotland

Scottish Government statistics for 2022 – 23 report an increase in households reporting rough sleeping, although still lower than pre pandemic. The data collected in Scotland relates to the number of claimants for homelessness support to their local authorities who state they had been rough sleeping the night before (1500 – 4% of applicants) and at some time in the three months before the application (2438 – 6% of applicants).

The [Ending Homelessness Together action plan](#) commits Scottish Government to invest £100 million to transform the homelessness system with a focus on [preventing homelessness](#) from happening in the first place, transforming temporary accommodation by transitioning to [rapid rehousing](#) by default and ending the use of night shelters by expanding rapid rehousing approaches, such as [Housing First](#).

It also states authorities will work to reduce the use of and time spent in [temporary accommodation](#) and provide [annual updates](#), as well as [homelessness statistics](#) twice a year, to monitor progress towards ending homelessness.

## Wales

According to [Senedd research](#), Wales was the **first nation globally** to create a [statutory prevention duty](#) on local authorities to mandate that they would assist anyone at risk of losing their home.

Despite this, in June 2023, there were an estimated **173** individuals sleeping rough throughout Wales. An Audit Wales [report](#) of 2020 claimed that “money is being wasted because public bodies continue to react to, rather than prevent, rough sleeping”.

In 2021 the Welsh Government published [Ending homelessness in Wales: A high level action plan – 2021-2026](#). Key to the goals of the Welsh government strategy is that homelessness becomes “**rare, brief and unrepeat**ed”.

Welsh Government plans to reform existing homelessness legislation and increase the role of the Welsh public service in preventing homelessness are set out in a [White paper](#), which is out for consultation and closes 16th January 2024.

It proposes to strengthen the existing Welsh prevention duty and also to end the tests that mean some people are deemed to be ‘[intentionally homelessness](#)’ or to not to be priority need.

There are also plans to develop and deliver **rapid rehousing transition plans** in all areas of Wales, including the continuation of Housing First projects in across Wales.

## Republic of Ireland

The Dublin rough sleeper count for spring 2023 found a reduction in rough sleeping since winter 2022. The total number of individuals engaged with during the count week was 83, a reduction of 8 persons (9%) on the same period the previous year.

A recent article has outlined the extreme issues being faced in the Irish capital with no hostel or other space being available – [Asylum seekers arriving in Ireland this weekend face risk of rough sleeping – The Irish Times](#).

Reducing and preventing homelessness remains a priority for the Government, as a signatory of the [Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness](#) the Irish Government has committed to eradicate homelessness by 2030 as set out in Housing for All, a New [Housing Plan for Ireland](#).

Details include increased ‘Housing First’ targets to 1,200 occupancies over five years, a new National Homeless Action Committee which will focus on building on the work the homelessness services sector did in protecting the vulnerable during the pandemic and examine the complex individual health and family circumstances that contribute to homelessness and personalised integrated healthcare for people experiencing homelessness.

## OU Research

[Cooper, Vickie and McCulloch, Daniel \(2023\). Homelessness and mortality: an extraordinary or unextraordinary phenomenon? Mortality, 28\(2\) pp. 220–235.](#)

“It was not until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that the political significance of homelessness and death shifted, this time framed as an extraordinary and preventable phenomenon that therefore required maximum political intervention. According to one study, policy interventions introduced during the pandemic helped to prevent 21,092 infections and 266 deaths amongst homeless people (Lewer et al., 2020). While remaining cognisant of the limitations of the extraordinary homelessness and housing policy measures brought in during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still worth considering the realm of possibility within those exceptional policy responses.”

## International Trends and Research

Many countries with a relatively high level of homelessness, such as the USA, have recently committed themselves to “ending” homelessness. By setting a national goal within a **federal** action plan, the federal government has sought to unify the efforts of agencies and partners at national, state and local levels.

The previous government in **Finland** also set a goal to “eradicate” homelessness by 2027. There had been a significant reduction in homelessness in the previous decade, as the government and authorities implemented a Housing First approach.

Under different governments, **Denmark** has also adopted the Housing First approach and reduced homelessness, but there is also a law against setting up and staying in “camps”.

## Wise up – 5 policy points to takeaway

1. Experiencing homelessness is hugely damaging to an individual’s life—chances, with associated devastating health impacts. There is economic, security and well-being impact at community and national levels, as well as for individuals.
2. Governments committing to eradicate rough sleeping is a major step in ensuring the right level of support is available to individuals before they become homeless. All governments reported a decrease in people rough-sleeping and deaths among homeless people during the Covid-19 pandemic because of the efforts of national, local government, and voluntary sectors to provide accommodation to anyone at risk.
3. Research should focus on learning from initiatives being undertaken by governments of different political backgrounds, here in the UK and Ireland, but also further afield. There is a shared trend towards setting national objectives to “eradicate” homelessness, but mixed policy approaches involving legislation, definitions, and citizens’ rights.
4. The current cost of living crisis is leading to increases in the number of people losing their accommodation and sometimes resulting in more people sleeping rough. Governments seeking to address homelessness must also address the economic hardships being faced by many people.
5. Although Housing First approaches are recognised both internationally and within the UK and Ireland as successful, it is important that such policies and services are appropriate and relevant to local need, circumstances, and agencies.



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### Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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## Get in touch



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