

# HOMELESSNESS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: A HIDDEN CRISIS

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# Executive Summary

This report was commissioned, funded and co-designed by a coalition of housing and homelessness organisations concerned by the growing yet unacknowledged problem of rural homelessness.

## The research found that:

- Rural homelessness is a real and growing problem that requires specific, locally informed and properly funded policy interventions. Without active interventions and good preventive services rural homelessness will keep increasing.
- People with intersecting disadvantages are particularly at risk of homelessness in rural areas. Support services are very dispersed and often unavailable.
- The voices of those experiencing, or who have experienced homelessness in rural areas are rarely heard. They told us about the high costs of food and transport and unavailable support services.
- The shame and stigma associated with homelessness in prosperous areas is a significant barrier to getting support. This intensifies the invisibility of rural homelessness which in turn leads to reduced support services, exacerbating need.
- Frontline workers have valuable insights into rural homelessness. 91% of professional respondents to our survey in rural areas told us that they think homelessness has increased in the last five years. This is corroborated by our analysis of the latest statistics from DLUHC which indicates that there is a 24% increase in rural rough sleeping in the past year.
- Rural poverty exacerbated by high housing costs are fundamental drivers of rural homelessness. Severe restrictions in local authority funding since 2009 intensifies risk. Rural areas receive 65% less funding per capita than urban for homelessness prevention who themselves are severely underfunded. Funding for genuinely affordable housing and state support for housing costs are also highly inadequate and have limited impact in rural areas.
- The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis leave people in rural areas at much greater risk of homelessness than before. We have a particular concern that 83% of respondents who work in rural areas think that addressing homelessness has become harder in the past five years.



## We recommend:

- Improved information about the scale and distribution of rural homelessness and more developed understandings about what is distinct about rural homelessness.
- Recognition of and strategies to respond to the problem of rural poverty. This is particularly urgent in the context of the aftermath of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis.
- A renewed political commitment to ending all homelessness including rural homelessness and other hidden forms of homelessness.
- In the light of market failure, a reconsideration of what it means for housing to be affordable and how genuinely affordable rural housing should be provided.
- A radical rethink of Local Housing Allowances and how they operate to exclude many from accessing housing in rural areas.
- Flexible, multi-disciplinary prevention services must be provided in rural areas with mental health services a priority. Those services must be proactive and seek out those in need. There needs to be innovation and joined up thinking in responding to the dispersed nature of rural homelessness.
- The provision of sustainable, reliable and affordable public transport links between rural and urban areas and market towns.
- Listening to those who are experiencing, have experienced or are at risk of experiencing homelessness in rural areas. Those experiences provide vital underpinnings to effective policy making.



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# 1. Introduction

This research report, written by researchers from the University of Kent and the University of Southampton, was funded and commissioned by a number of organisations and Housing Associations working in rural areas who were increasingly concerned by what seemed to them to be a growing yet unacknowledged problem of rural homelessness. Inspired by Rory Weal's research into rural homelessness in the United States, funded by a Churchill Fellowship (Weal 2021), they organised themselves into a Steering Group to see how the knowledge gap and policy vacuum around rural homelessness could be addressed. The members of the steering group are listed in Appendix A.

Research on homelessness in most countries focuses on urban areas, where official statistics record larger concentrations of homelessness. The more dispersed nature of homelessness in rural areas and the perception that these areas are more affluent means they do not receive the same attention. This is not to say that there has not been research on rural housing and homelessness in the UK (most notably Cloke et al 2002, but also Satsangi et al 2010 and Gibbons et al 2020), but there is a significant knowledge gap, particularly post-pandemic, about contemporary rural housing and homelessness issues and the scale, effectiveness and nature of local interventions. There is significant research on rural homelessness in the United States (Spissinger 2019, Weal 2021) and Canada (Waegemakers et al 2016, MacDonald and Gaulin 2020, Buck-McFadyen 2022), as well as some comparative projects (Milbourne and Cloke 2006). An interesting consensus emerges from the literature:

- Rural homelessness is often hidden, invisible and under-reported.

- Rural homelessness requires targeted and specific interventions that are different from those in urban areas.
- National welfare programmes and initiatives are rarely set up to consider their impact in rural areas, which limits their ability to tackle rural poverty (Milbourne 2010).

Our research took place between January 2022 and February 2023, and was a collaboration between the Steering Group and Research Team. The project also benefited from advice and support from a Sounding Board, comprising key organisations and stakeholders concerned with homelessness in the UK. Further information about those involved is available on the project website: [www.research.kent.ac.uk/rural-homelessness](http://www.research.kent.ac.uk/rural-homelessness)

Whilst this report has been written independently of the Steering Group, the authors are very grateful for its careful reading and comments on the contents and would like to acknowledge in particular the input and insights of Martin Collet and Rory Weal. The authors would also like to acknowledge the time and thoughtfulness of all those who responded to the survey, participated in interviews, invited us to projects and joined in conversations about rural homelessness. Without their insights, particularly of those who are experiencing or have recently experienced homelessness, this report would be considerably diminished.

## Research Questions and Aims

The aim of the project is to address the lack of evidence about rural homelessness, paving the way for possible larger scale research projects into rural homelessness. For the purposes of the project we took a broad definition of homelessness, incorporating not only rooflessness but those living in insecure accommodation and/or at risk of becoming homeless in the near future. This

moves beyond England’s definition of statutory homelessness to include consideration of all ‘core’ and ‘wider’ homelessness categories (Bramley 2017). Although the project is small in scale, it has enabled a review of existing knowledge and data and the identification of research gaps. We have also been given ‘snapshot’ insights into the experience of homelessness and rough sleeping in the countryside from interviews and conversations with people who are currently, or have recently been in this situation, who were very generously willing to share their stories. In addition we have benefited from the insights of housing/homelessness professionals from statutory and third sector organisations. Many of those who talked to us have worked on housing and homelessness issues in rural areas for a very long time. We recognise that without their dedication and expertise the situation for those experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness would be considerably worse.

The research aims to:

- Identify the evidence gap between rural and urban homelessness;
- Consider possible intersectional causes of homelessness that structurally disadvantage certain populations;
- Investigate whether ending rural rough sleeping requires distinct policy responses; and
- Inform government responses to rural homelessness and rural housing policy.

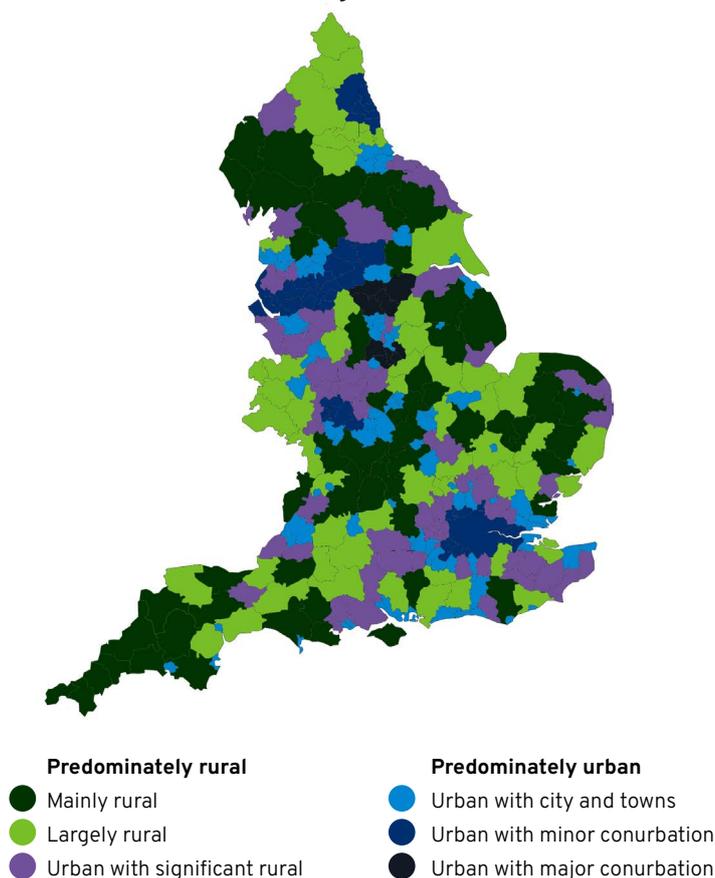
## Field sites

Our research took place in four rural areas, selected to represent different types of rurality throughout England. Choosing a range of rural areas was important as the ways in which homelessness is experienced and responded to locally differs.

In making our selections we drew on the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England (Government Statistical Service 2017) which categorises settlements

with a population of over 10,000 as ‘urban’, and recognises three different types of rural local authority districts: ‘mainly rural’ ‘largely rural’ and ‘urban with significant rural’. For coherence and policy impact in a small scale project, we focussed our qualitative research in England, but our survey was open to anyone in the United Kingdom. As the legal framework for housing and homelessness is different in each of the devolved nations, our recommendations and findings focus on England only.

## 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authorities in England



Our choices of field sites reflected the need to consider areas from different geographical locations in England, and took into account the different dispersal of centres of population within and within reach of the area. We also considered proximity to urban areas, as well as proximity to larger settlements that are still considered rural within the Rural-Urban Classification system. We chose areas

which were not, or at least not predominantly, coastal. We focussed on rural settlements of under 10,000 inhabitants within the counties chosen, and paid particular focus to smaller settlements of under 3,000 inhabitants. Our research sites were South Cambridgeshire, Herefordshire, North Yorkshire and Kent.

### South Cambridgeshire, mainly rural

The district comprises more than 100 villages, and no towns. The district totally surrounds the City of Cambridge, a large urban district with a significant population of students and those working in higher education and research. The district is around 50 miles from London and combines traditional sectors such as farming with technology, finance, and business located at a small number of business and innovation parks. The South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) is based at a business park in the village of Cambourne, about 1 hour from the City of Cambridge. SCDC reports<sup>14</sup> low levels of people who are sleeping rough (5), whereas the City of Cambridge report high levels (23). People migrate from the SCDC area to the city of Cambridge to access the support available there such as hostels and hot food provision. They are also directed to the City by the SCDC. Despite the City of Cambridge and SCDC being two different district councils, there is a clear relationship between them, with people experiencing homelessness, as well as housing and homelessness providers in SCDC, relying on the City to provide support for people sleeping rough, as well as a joint housing strategy. According to our conversations, at the time of the research there were three individuals 'living off grid' in the rural areas on the edge of the City and into South Cambridgeshire. These individuals have been contacted and apparently chosen not to engage with services. The main issue SCDC reports is homelessness arising from the termination of Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs) with no other affordable options available. Homelessness in the area rose significantly between 2012 - 2019 with the largest factors being terminations of ASTs, which overtook the factor 'parents no longer being able to accommodate' their children. Based on

these trends and taking into account rising private rents, SCDC expects homelessness to continue to increase significantly. There has also been a notable increase in complex cases with clients requiring mental health support.

### Herefordshire and North Yorkshire, largely rural

In largely rural areas, such as Herefordshire and North Yorkshire, urban conurbations are further away. Our research found that many people who sleep rough in rural areas are escaping challenging situations in urban centres, such as violence, abuse, crime and drug related negative relationships. This means they do not want to seek support or accommodation in cities or towns, but then find that rural areas have limited options for emergency or temporary accommodation and support. Furthermore, people do not necessarily escape the problems of the urban; county lines drug operations may operate in rural areas that have easy access from the motorway and congregate in the larger market towns.

Public transport to urban centres or larger towns has become more inaccessible in recent years due to reduced services and increased prices, thus limiting options for support even further. Some also told us that they were 'born and bred' in the area and reluctant to go elsewhere, so offers of accommodation out of the area have not been right for them. Some mentioned not wanting to leave support networks in the area or leaving behind their sense of belonging to a village or hamlet. There are therefore both emotional and practical reasons for those experiencing rural homelessness to stay in their local areas. One person with experience of homelessness in a rural setting described it as a 'postcode lottery'; if you happen to be born in a rural area you simply do not have access to appropriate services and support when in a crisis.

In Herefordshire we found that most services were based from the central town of Hereford. Travelling to Hereford from the surrounding market towns and villages was expensive and difficult without a car as the area comprises mainly C roads leading

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<sup>14</sup>Rough sleeping snapshot data 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2022/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2022#annex-regional-maps> [accessed 03/03/2023]

off single carriageway A roads. A number of charitable organisations, food banks and church run services provided support in areas outside the town. Farming is the main industry alongside manufacturing and food and drink production. Agricultural jobs are often seasonal meaning that those relying on work in the industry could be without work in the winter months.

In North Yorkshire we found it was challenging to access shelters and support. Much support for rough sleeping is based in areas with more dense populations. However food banks were in operation and were reported to be very busy. There were a range of small charitable and religious organisations providing different kinds of support such as warm spaces and community fridges. Tourism is critical to the economy in North Yorkshire, particularly in the Craven District, which sits on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The increase in holiday lettings including AirBnB was explained to us by local organisations as a significant issue affecting the housing market. The area also sees migration of people begging from urban centres to more affluent market towns and those popular with tourists.

#### Kent, urban with significant rural areas

Kent, which is classified as urban with significant rural areas, sees more frequent movement between rural, urban and coastal settings. Kent, like Cambridge, is within easy reach of London, which probably impacts upon the forms of homelessness found in the county. The South East is also the area with the highest concentration of rough sleeping after London (gov.uk). We focussed our field work in the Ashford and Canterbury districts, but spoke with services and organisations across the county. We found that bus services are more frequent than in the more rural counties, and in many places have direct connections to larger towns or cities where support is readily available, compared to more rural areas. However transport in and out of smaller villages can be challenging as some locations have only one service per day. Organisations in Kent talked to us about the transience of homeless populations, particularly those rough sleeping. A typical scenario would be for someone sleeping rough moving between larger towns or cities to

find shelter, support, healthcare and food when needed, but moving into more rural parts for safety at night. However, issues with attachments to smaller villages and not wanting to move out of their locality were also prevalent. Poverty prevents people from staying in their local areas, when they want to. Finding appropriate types of property in terms of affordability and size in rural villages is problematic, and those on the housing register can wait for years, unless they are willing to move to an urban area, as rural housing stock has disappeared through the 'Right to Buy' scheme and has not been replaced.

### Data collection

This research project made use of quantitative and qualitative data. Our methodology comprised four strands of data gathering and evidencing.

- Research/literature review with focus on information and research already available regarding rural homelessness, identifying the gaps;
- Analysis of existing data from DLUHC (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities) regarding rural homelessness and rough sleeping;
- Quantitative data collection: Survey distributed to NGOs and Local Authorities (LAs), distributed nationally via a project website and social media;
- Qualitative data collection: Short-term ethnographic research in our four field sites, and telephone interviews with organisations from other rural areas in the country (see Appendix B). The ethnographic research took place between May 2022 and January 2023, with site visits ranging from 2 to 10 days. During this time we had group and/or individual conversations (informal or semi-structured interviews) with staff in NGOs and local authorities (LAs) as well as conversations with people with experience of rural homelessness. We aimed to speak with at least three people with experience of homelessness

in each area, but there was some variation depending on the time of year of our site visit and people's willingness to partake in the research.

For the ethnographic research we identified local organisations concerned with rural homelessness and we interviewed key personnel, including representatives from the Local Authority Housing and Homelessness teams. We also met and spent time with people currently experiencing homelessness in each area, and completed in-depth interviews (full breakdown of interviews in Appendix B). In collaboration with all interviewees, we mapped out availability of vital services, including health, food, advice, hygiene, public transport.

Our survey (N=157), which was completed by staff members in organisations working with housing and homelessness in the UK (see Chapter 3 for further details), comprised questions relating to experiences of homelessness in different areas of the UK, including specific questions about how rural homelessness differs from urban. Survey data was analysed and cross-tabulated using SPSS and produced statistically significant findings.

### Ethics

We worked with our Steering Group to identify our case study areas and potential participants and to gain informed consent. We prepared information sheets, aimed at different audiences, to inform participants about the project aims and activities, including the organisation and funding of the research, the process of ethical approval, the intended beneficiaries, the project team and access to the data. The sheets also explained what participation in the project would mean (time commitment, activity), how data would be used, the measures to protect confidentiality, the process of data anonymisation, where results will be published, how data will be stored, feedback on the project outcomes, and the right to withdraw from the research. Participants were asked to complete and sign a consent form<sup>5</sup> before taking part in any research activities. People who were experiencing

homelessness at the time of the project were offered shopping vouchers for their time. To protect those taking part in the project we ensured that all interviews took place with a support worker present, or in a shelter with support staff available. All participants have been anonymised, including place signifiers that may give away their locations.

For qualitative data we made use of a confidential, professional transcription service to transcribe recordings of interviews and meetings. Ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews, telephone interviews and group interviews were analysed in a two-tiered thematic approach, using coding to identify key issues and then completing more detailed analysis to unpack relevant information that related to our key themes.

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<sup>5</sup>In some instances verbal consent only was obtained at the request of interviewees.

# Good practice example: **Pop-up legal clinics**

## **Pop-up Legal Clinics**

The Chief Executive of two small separate homeless charities told us about how they responded to the problem of getting legal advice to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in rural areas. They created 'pop-up' legal clinics which use local libraries and similar sites. They bring in a solicitor from a London Law Centre on Zoom, they

have support workers there, and they provide legal advice that way. It has a cost, but it is much more sustainable than setting up a law centre which would not really work in a rural area. At the moment the advice is limited to housing and homelessness but they are thinking of extending it to adult social care.



## 2. Rural Governance and Housing Law

In this section we explain the formal policy responsibilities for housing and homelessness in rural areas and set out the legal framework as it impacts upon people who are experiencing or threatened with homelessness. Here we will also consider the criminal law as it affects people experiencing homelessness. The section will put the findings from the survey and field sites into their broader legal and bureaucratic context.

### Local government

The structure of local government varies from area to area. In most of England there are two tiers of local government – county and district – and responsibility for council services is split between them. District councils are responsible, inter alia, for housing and homelessness services. County councils are responsible for social services including adult social care. The complexity of the problems that underpin rural homelessness means that responsibilities for services that individuals may require may be split between district and county level. Our professional interviewees noted that the bureaucratic divisions between county and district councils can impede the wraparound care that those experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness may need. Particular difficulties have been experienced as a result of county councils historically having control of Supporting People funding whilst district councils have housing and homelessness responsibilities.

The county council/district council split is not present in all rural areas. Whilst unitary authorities which provide all local government services in their areas are generally concentrated in cities and larger towns there are now six shire county councils that are unitary, including Herefordshire, one of our field sites. North Yorkshire, another of our field sites, is due to become a unitary local authority in April 2023 replacing North Yorkshire County Council, and seven district and borough councils. This will bring together spending power and services to reduce the impact of rising costs. It is anticipated that savings will be directed towards housing, health care, transport links and local enterprise.

At the time of our field work, in each of our other two research sites, Kent and South Cambridgeshire, there was a county council/district council split. South Cambridgeshire is however part of a combined authority, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Being part of a combined authority does not replace the existing local authority structure but it is a means for pooling resources and making collective decisions. There was some evidence that this worked well for the effective delivery of services.

### The legal framework

The legal framework differs in each of the devolved areas of the UK. In this report we are concerned with England where the law about individual entitlement to housing assistance is set out in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996. The responsibilities upon housing authorities have been considerably extended since then, first by the Homelessness Act 2002 which facilitated a strategic approach to housing and homelessness and more recently by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which focussed on prevention. It places duties on local authorities to intervene at earlier stages to prevent homelessness in their areas. It also requires housing authorities to provide homelessness services to all those affected, not just those who have ‘priority need’.

The current Homelessness Code of Guidance was last updated on 31st January 2023. It provides extensive policy guidance on how local authorities should operate the legislation. Some of the housing professionals we interviewed suggested that priority need requirements were a barrier to providing effective help.

### The Housing Act 1996 (HA 1996)

The law about homelessness is not expressed in terms of individual rights but in terms of duties that local housing authorities have towards certain individuals who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

In summary, local authorities owe duties to provide accommodation (or assistance to obtain accommodation) to some people experiencing homelessness. These duties only arise if an applicant is

- i. homeless or threatened with homelessness
- ii. not subject to immigration control, and
- iii. has not left their previous accommodation intentionally.
- iv. In addition, they must fall into a category of priority need, which includes
  - a. pregnant women
  - b. people with dependent children, and
  - c. people who are 'vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical disability or other special reason'.

Where the local authority has reason to believe an applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness, they have a responsibility to inquire whether any duties are owed to them. If an applicant successfully establishes they are owed a duty, the local authority can decide to house them in the private rented sector.

### Priority need

Various updates have been made to the categories of priority need since 1996. The Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 strengthened the assistance available to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness by extending the priority need categories to homeless 16 and 17 year olds; care leavers aged 18, 19 and 20; people who are vulnerable as a result of time spent in care, the

armed forces, prison or custody, and people who are vulnerable because they have fled their home because of violence.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 amends Part 7 of the 1996 Act to further strengthen support available to victims of domestic abuse by extending priority need to all eligible victims of domestic abuse regardless of whether they have children, if they become homeless as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is broadly defined in the legislation to include behaviour which is controlling or coercive, psychologically or emotionally abusive and financial abusive as well as physical or sexual abuse and violent or threatening behaviour.

The other significant legal change in connection with priority need is the decision of the Supreme Court in *Hotak v London Borough of Southwark* [2015] UKSC 30 (Meers 2017). The Court decided that when judging vulnerability a housing officer must compare the applicant before them with an ordinary person if made homeless, and not, as previously thought, with an ordinary actual homeless person. This not only simplifies the legal test but also makes it clear that decisions on vulnerability must take account of all an applicant's circumstances.

### Local connection

Several of our professional interviewees suggested that the lack of local connection was a barrier to people receiving local authority assistance. This may be because they have misunderstood the law on local connection, or that local authorities are inappropriately using local connection as a gate-keeping exercise.

The Housing Act 1996 provides that, if an applicant has no connections in the area they are applying, but they do have a connection (known as a 'local connection') to another local authority, the local authority receiving the application is permitted to refer them back to that other authority. It does not, as is often mistakenly stated, mean that an individual must have a local connection with a particular area if they are to make an application there. A local connection can be established through residence, work or family connections.

### Ineligibility

There are certain categories of people who cannot apply for housing help because they are statutorily ineligible for housing assistance although they are entitled to advice and information free of charge. These rules are complex and subject to change, but in summary they require either that an applicant is habitually resident (has a settled home) in the Common Travel Area i.e. the UK, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and or the Republic of Ireland or that they are people from abroad who are specifically eligible for housing assistance. In general people subject to immigration control (that is people who require leave to enter or remain in the UK (whether or not such leave has been given) are not eligible for housing assistance but there are some exceptions. These include refugees, people with indefinite leave to remain and EU settled status as long as they are habitually resident, people with humanitarian protections and people with leave granted under Article 8 of the Human Rights Convention.

### The Homelessness Act 2002

This Act introduced requirements that local housing authorities adopt strategic approaches to tackling homelessness by requiring (i) regular reviews of levels and likely future levels of homelessness in their districts and (ii) homelessness strategies aimed at the prevention of homelessness.

### The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA)

The HRA, which came about at least in part as a result of the campaigning work of Crisis, introduced five key changes to the legal framework set out in the Housing Act 1996 (Cowan 2019 )

- i. people threatened with homelessness should receive proper advice;
- ii. a duty is placed on specified public authorities to refer applicants to housing authorities ('the referral duty');
- iii. local authorities must work with applicants to produce a personalised plan of action following an assessment;

- iv. local authorities have a duty to prevent homelessness ('the prevention duty')
- v. local authorities have a duty to relieve homelessness ('the relief duty').

The Act also extends the definition of 'threatened with homelessness' so that duties are owed if it is likely a person will become homeless within 56 days (as opposed to 28 days under the 1996 Act). Someone who is served with a valid notice under s.21 of the Housing Act 1988 to end their assured shorthold tenancy is also treated as if they are threatened with homelessness if the notice has expired or will expire within 56 days and their rented accommodation is the only accommodation that is available for them to occupy.

Our professional interviewees generally welcomed the Homelessness Reduction Act, although one commented that it was like 'Marmite'; either loving it or hating it. Whilst it was full of good intentions it was a 'bureaucratic sledgehammer'. Their wish was that the bureaucracy be streamlined, and that front line workers should be involved in the design of any preventive service.

### Criminal law and homelessness

Concerns about the unproductive impact of criminal law on people sleeping rough are long standing. Although provisions repealing the Vagrancy Act 1824 have been enacted via the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#), the repeal is not to be implemented until the government decides upon replacement provisions. The government has indicated that it intends that the replacement law will prioritise those specific forms of begging that can be most detrimental and which may involve aggressive behaviours and it will provide for responses that encourage and mandate individuals into support (DLUHC 2022). The consultation on the replacement provisions closed in May 2022 but to date there have been no proposals published about alternative provisions. Squatting of residential property was criminalised by s.144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and

Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 despite evidence from Crisis that criminalising squatting would only work to further criminalise vulnerable people and that squatting was more a reflection of scarcity of provision and inadequate support and assistance than evil intent (Crisis 2011). There have been some suggestions that the criminalisation of squatting has led to poor outcomes and even death (Hern 2013).

There is a raft of other anti-social behaviour measures from criminal behaviour orders to dispersal orders that are available to the authorities to control the behaviour of experiencing homelessness. Of these perhaps public space protection orders (PSPOs) are the best known. Introduced by the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 PSPOs replaced previous legislation and introduced flexible locally focused powers to deal with nuisances or problems which are perceived to harm the local community's quality of life. An order will specify an area where harmful activities may be taking place and can impose conditions and restrictions on people using the specified area to prevent the prescribed behaviour. The impact of these measures on people experiencing street homelessness has been researched by Heap et al (2022) who note a strong correlation between the behaviours associated with people experiencing street homelessness and the sanctioned behaviour such as sitting on the pavement. They report that,

*People experiencing street homelessness said they felt constantly policed within a PSPO area. The PSPO can be considered a mechanism for controlling the street sleeping population. Many of our participants felt harassed by the nature of the policing, feeling continually on edge. This was fuelled by the high volume of informal interactions with the policing bodies where they were repeatedly told to move on.*  
(Heap et al 2022: 136)

*People sleeping rough are also more likely to be subject to informal enforcement measures, such as being moved on by the police*  
(Crisis 2017, Heap 2022).

Avoiding the police is likely to contribute to the invisibility of rural homelessness. It also potentially diverts people from support rather than engaging with their needs. As Heap et al note,

*There was consensus amongst our participants that the way the PSPO was policed, such as moving people on and tipping away alcohol, did not solve the underlying ASB problems. This view was supported by the participants experiencing street homelessness who confirmed that the PSPO did not change their behaviour, but instead made their lives more difficult and unpleasant. It was also clear from these participants that the PSPO was not often used to engage and support*  
(Heap 2022: 138).

#### Criminality associated with homelessness

The association of homelessness with criminality can act as an additional barrier to the provision and access to effective support.

One hostel in Cambridge often got phone calls from the police after noise complaints from neighbours. The neighbours complained about groups of people smoking crack and being antisocial in a park backing onto the hostel and assumed it was people using the hostel who were causing the issues. A charity worker told us that it wasn't people in the hostel, whose beds were in high demand, who were being antisocial in the park. However, neighbours simply linked the behaviour to the hostel. This served as an example of how people in the area had a lower tolerance for anti-social behaviour as well as the stigma and criminal association attached to homelessness. This is despite the fact that research by Crisis has shown that people sleeping on the street are almost 17 times more likely to be victims of violence compared to the general public.

On the other hand sometimes breaking the law was the only way some people felt they could survive on the streets:

*"I know a lot of homeless people like me brother, he was, and me brother was homeless for five and a half years before he got his*

*property. And yeah, and then the council was on the verge of kicking him out 'cos they didn't like him and because of his criminal record. Obviously, he had to go out stealing to go and get food. He had to do what he had to do to survive, that's what most homeless people do, that's why some homeless people go out, do serious crimes 'cos they know they can go to prison, they've got a roof over their – they've got three meals a day, at least they've got a bed and everything to depend on like”.*

Instances of crime can have serious effects on community attitudes. Cambridge is a city known for cycling, and bicycles are a popular mode of transportation. One charity worker told us how they were disgusted by an online social media group that named and shamed bicycle thieves.

Often, stealing and selling bicycles was a source of income for people experiencing homelessness. The online group claimed that thieves were mainly drug addicts who had ‘already lost all dignity’ and invited photo and video footage to be posted to the group so the community could identify them. Whilst it was obviously wrong to steal bicycles, the charity worker was disgusted at the aggression and verbal abuse the online group directed at people experiencing homelessness, and the lack of sympathy and understanding for their situation. Sometimes people’s family members would intervene and defend people accused of theft, explaining their difficult situations and asking the community to ‘give them a break’.



# Good practice example: Mobile community hub

Turning Tides is a West Sussex single homelessness charity that runs various rural homelessness initiatives. Their mission is to end local homelessness, putting local communities at their heart. This includes the predominantly rural areas of Horsham and Mid Sussex. Rough sleeping is much more hidden than in the towns but with such a huge geography they struggled to make sure people rough sleeping could find them. The first thing they learnt was to enlist local businesses, park staff etc to be their eyes and ears for referrals, but a further challenge was to find a place to meet people sleeping rough. As a solution, they started a mobile hub in a converted double decker bus.

It is highly visible when parked up in various locations. It meant Tom, who has been rough sleeping for 6 years with severe alcohol issues, could meet his outreach worker safely, have showers, warm food and make plans. He had been in and out of hostels for years. Over time Turning Tide's worker based in the bus has managed to build trust with Tom and after some temporary hostel stays he will now go into one of their Housing First flats leading to long term independence.

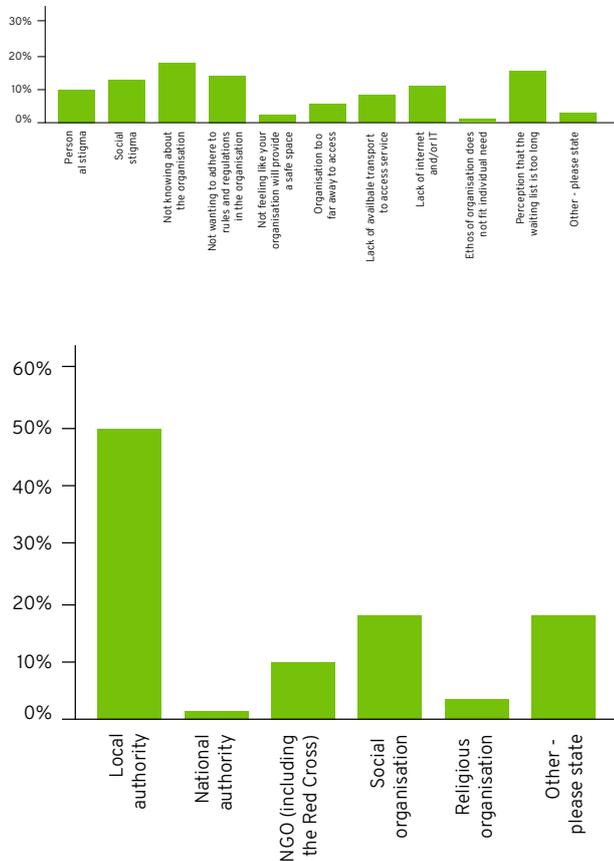


### 3. Survey Findings and National Data

The survey was distributed online via social media and email and through our project website. It consisted of approximately 60 questions relating to homelessness in rural areas, including one free text question. Our respondents (N=157) were spread across the country, with higher response rates from the South of England. The survey was open to anyone in a housing or homelessness organisation in the UK, but the majority of our respondents were from England. We have analysed findings from the survey overall, as well as analysing results from respondents who stated their organisation is based in a rural area.

Those who completed the survey were from Local Authorities (50.5%), NGOs such as campaigning organisations (10%) and social organisations, such as shelters (18%), and some did not fit any of these categories (18%) and 68% were from rural areas. It is also worth noting that 34% of those who completed the survey reported that they had experienced homelessness themselves in the past.

Our survey was not designed to, and nor did we have the resources to produce accurate figures for the scale of homelessness in rural areas, but it did give an indication of how organisations working with rural homelessness view the problem.



# Main findings



86%

consider homelessness to be a significant or acute problem, with 55% stating it is a significant problem in their area of action, and 31% considering it a major problem or an emergency.



88%

of all respondents from rural and urban areas think that homelessness has increased in their areas in the past five years.



91%

of respondents from rural areas believe homelessness has increased in their location in the past five years.



83%

of respondents who work in rural areas think that addressing homelessness in rural areas has become harder in the past five years.

**Our survey respondents highlighted that rural homelessness is distinct from urban homelessness and that those experiencing homelessness in rural areas receive less support.**



81%

of respondents believe that rough sleeping is experienced differently in rural compared to urban areas.



81%

of the respondents consider the overall experience of homelessness in rural areas is different from urban scenarios.



55%

of the respondents think that the reasons for rural homelessness are different from urban homelessness.



65%

of those who work in rural areas believe that rural providers are less supported in comparison to their urban counterparts.



47%

think that the future prospects for rural providers are negative, although nearly the same percentage of respondents stated that they do not know (44%).

The two most common responses from the open-ended question asking what is distinct about rural homelessness referred to invisibility and lack of resources. Respondents highlighted the perception that rural homelessness does not exist or that people are less aware of it, because they don't see it. They also highlighted that urban areas tend to have more resources to deal with homelessness which may be at the expense of rural settings.

*“People do not believe that rural homelessness exists, but it does. There are far fewer accommodation options in rural villages with high second home ownerships and few AST [Assured Shorthold Tenancies], and we do not build sufficient social housing.”*

*“Provision of accommodation and support for homeless people tends to be concentrated in urban areas, yet many rural residents are understandably unwilling to move to urban areas to access services.”*

## Drivers for rural homelessness

We asked our respondents to tell us what they believe are the three most important drivers for homelessness in their area. The survey showed that LAs and organisations believe the three most important drivers of rural homelessness are a lack of funding and resources, followed by a lack of affordable accommodation and emergency accommodation, and a lack of mental health provision.



80%

of respondents believe that the main obstacle in addressing homelessness in their area is structural (lack of funding/resources/housing), rather than individual (reasons relating to choices or actions by the individual).

## What are the three most important drivers?



29%

of all respondents stated that a lack of affordable housing and emergency accommodation is the most important reason for the increase in homelessness in their area in the past five years.

Respondents from rural areas stated that the three most important drivers for homelessness in their areas are:



16%

Lack of affordable housing



14%

Decline of social sector housing as a proportion of all housing



11%

Financial problems

### Other drivers:



9%

of all respondents stated that substance misuse is one of the top 3 reasons behind the increase in homelessness in their area



11%

of all respondents believe that mental health is one of the top 3 reasons for the increase in homelessness in their area



43%

of all respondents stated that housing (both emergency and affordable housing), B&B's and shelters (Emergency accommodation; Hostels; Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs); Housing First) are lacking in their areas

Respondents from rural areas stated that the 3 most important services lacking in their areas were:



45%

housing (Emergency accommodation; hostels; AST's; Housing First);



16%

mental health services; and



12%

domestic abuse/gender based violence services.

### What are the services most in demand in your area?



18%

of all respondents stated that the services in most demand in their area is emergency accommodation



18%

of all respondents stated that the services most in demand in their areas are mental health services



12%

of all respondents stated that food (including food banks and soup kitchens) is the service in most demand in their area

*“Lack of services available, overstretched statutory services, limited housing availability, lack of funding support for homelessness charities, breakdown of partnership working around people sleeping rough by local authority [are some of the biggest challenges]. People living with complex needs not sufficiently supported. [Further problems include] Major cuts to funding for floating support services Lack of work opportunities, lack of temporary accommodation, lack of transport.”*

### Proportion of respondents listing barriers in their top 3 in rural areas

Respondents told us that stigma is one of the most important barriers to people seeking support in rural areas. The lack of affordable and reliable public transport was also noted in the free-text comments as a very big problem in rural areas.

- 23% of respondents think that stigma, either personal or social, is one of the three most important reasons/barriers that people experiencing homelessness face when seeking support.

*“We provide services in a rural area which attracts wealthy incomers, resulting in a housing market that is almost impossible to access for those with modest incomes. It seems at times that the wealthy incomers are the most vociferous opponents of new rural affordable housing schemes, and we often hear prejudice against ‘those sorts*

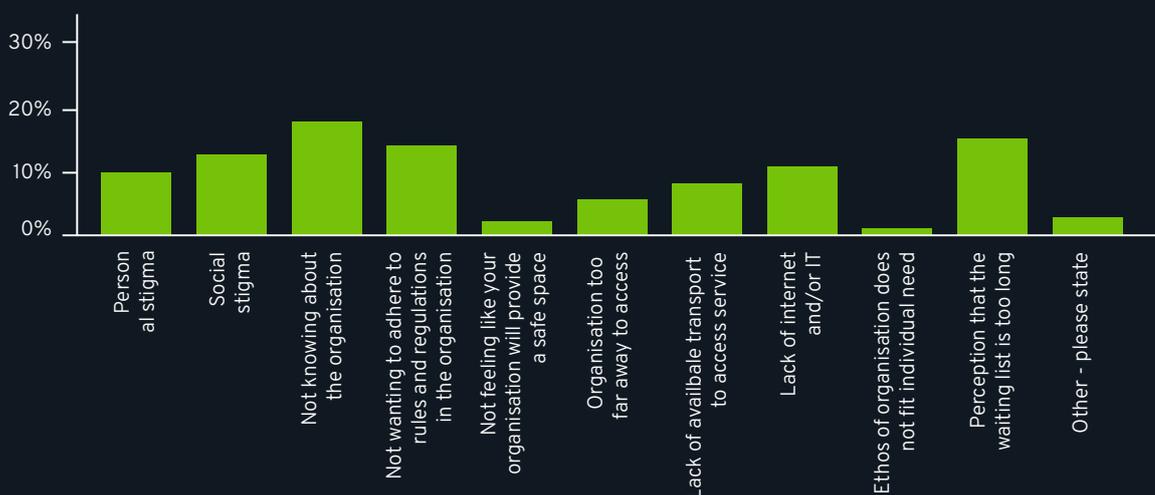
*of people’ who require affordable homes.”*

*“Rural communities tend to be more insular and sometimes less welcoming.”*

- In our free text comments many commented on travel being an extremely important factor in the challenges of rural homelessness.

*“I think that there is a lot more hidden homelessness in rural areas. There are fewer services as the demand is lower, access to services is difficult due to poor transport links. Low wage economy and super ageing population in a beautiful area means that there is a prevalence of second/holiday homes. Social/affordable housing is difficult to access so people sofa surf. There are fewer people with [no recourse to public funds] NRPF as there is little to attract them to the area - no shelters/work prospects/housing/visible migrant support services.”*

Rural respondents: Main driver for increase of homelessness in the past 5 years (choose up to 3)	Percentage
Decline of social sector housing as a proportion of all housing	14.34%
Growing fragmentation of families	4.78%
Lack of affordable housing	15.81%
Reduced welfare provision	9.19%
Tighter mortgage regulation and higher costs for first time buyers	2.94%
Unfavourable market conditions	2.21%
Addiction	7.72%
Discharge from prison	5.15%
Financial problems	10.66%
Leaving the care system	3.68%
Mental illness	9.93%
Relationship breakdown (including domestic abuse and violence)	11.03%
Other reason	1.84%
Do not know	0.74%



## National data

### Scale of rural homelessness according to government statistics

In addition to our survey analysis, we examined official statistics on rough sleeping and homelessness in England. In official statistics, the scale of rough sleeping in rural areas appears to be small in comparison to urban homelessness. In other words, the number of people sleeping rough in rural areas is smaller than that of people in urban areas. However, our qualitative research and survey have highlighted that organisations in rural areas perceive homelessness to have increased over the last five years, and many report that they believe the figures in official statistics are not accurate. Additionally, although the number of people experiencing homelessness in the countryside are lower than in urban areas, the increase in reported rough sleeping in rural areas is nearly as high as in urban areas.

### Rough sleeping data

The Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) snapshot data from 2021 showed a total of 2443 people were sleeping rough in one single night in England, out of which 382 were found in rural areas<sup>4</sup>. The total figure was a decrease of 9% from the previous year (DLUHC 2023a).

In 2022 the number of people sleeping rough has risen drastically to 3069, which is an increase of 26% from the previous year. Rural areas: 473 people were classified as sleeping rough in one single night in rural areas. This represents an increase of 24% (23.82%) in comparison to the same areas in the previous year.

Urban areas: 2,302 people were classified as sleeping rough in one single night in urban areas. This represents an increase of 25% (24.84%) in comparison to the same areas in the previous year.

## Homelessness data

According to Crisis (2023) the rising levels of rough sleeping are also happening alongside increases in households accepted as statutorily homeless, as well as higher numbers of individuals in temporary accommodation, including children.

With figures currently available for 2021-22, the initial figures of assessments (290 180) nearly matches the pre-covid figure from 2018-19 (292 690), but the total amount of households owed a prevention or relief duty has increased (2018-19: 269 500) (2021-22: 278 110), which is an increase of 3%. Current data for the financial year 2022-23 is not yet available, but if the trend continues we can expect further increases in both households assessed as homeless, and those owed a prevention or relief duty.

## Homelessness Prevention Grant

Funding allocations for homelessness prevention in rural areas is also significantly lower than in urban areas. For example, in the total allocation of the Homelessness Prevention Grant 2022-2023 rural areas will receive £29.270.553 and urban areas £263.508.049. This means that in the next financial year, rural areas will receive £234.237.496 less financial support than their urban counterparts (DLUHC 2023b). As population size is smaller in rural areas, we looked at this figure per capita.

- **Rural** local authorities receive **£2.50** of financial provisions for homelessness per capita.
- **Urban** local authorities receive **£7.15** of financial provisions for homelessness per capita.

**Rural areas receive 65% less<sup>5</sup>** financial provisions for homelessness per capita in comparison to their urban counterparts.

<sup>4</sup>The figures disaggregated by rural and urban areas have been calculated as follows: The rural category corresponds to the category "Predominantly Rural" from the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England. The urban category corresponds to the category "Predominantly Urban" from the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England. The category "Urban with significant rural" has been discharged as it cannot be catalogued as either rural or urban. These UK figures are directly extracted from the raw data provided by the UK Gov and relate to the jurisdiction of England. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2022>

<sup>5</sup>This figure was calculated using government data regarding the Homelessness Prevention Fund for the year 2022-23 and calculated by total population size in Local Authority Districts considered as 'rural' and 'urban', as defined in footnote 3. We also analysed the data per household in the areas, and the figure was similar. Please note that there are other sources of funding available for homelessness, rough sleeping prevention and intervention. We have analysed one funding stream only, showing an indication that funding is significantly less in rural areas. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homelessness-prevention-grant-2022-to-2023>



## Case Study **Mary's Story**

Mary\* has two children. She was evicted from her house and moved into a caravan. When her children were taken into care she moved into a tent. Someone disturbed her tent when she went into the local town to get food so she slept on a bench in the entrance of the church.

She was able to collect clean water from the farmer whose land she was staying on. She had been in trouble with the police for lighting fires to keep warm.

*'Like if I'm in a tent, obviously, I've got to – I know I've had the police come to me a couple of times, like for making a fire... they came there and told me to put the fire out, I'm like,*

*"How else do you want me to eat?" I've even had friends, obviously, I can't steal, I've even had friends who are saying, "Have you eaten today?" And I'm like, "No." And they've gone into town and they've actually stole food for me so I could eat that thing.*

*'...some of me family don't drive and they've said come over and they can stay with me and I'm like – and that's down in [place], and it's going to cost you about £60 a train ticket and I'm like I haven't even got 60p.'*

\* Names have been changed to protect people's identities.

## 4. Understanding Rural Homelessness

One of our major findings is that rural homelessness is distinct from urban homelessness and requires specific policy attention. Causes, experiences, contexts and responses differ from urban areas and there are specifically rural characteristics that need to be taken into account. In this section of the report we consider some of the ways that experiencing homelessness in rural areas is different from experiencing it in the urban context. Before we do that however we acknowledge that drawing a clear line between the urban and the rural when understanding homelessness is increasingly complex.

### Rural and Urban relations: the elimination of the rural?

In many ways our research goes against the grain of contemporary social research which suggests that the significance of place, and the meaning and importance of distinctions such as those between the urban and the rural, and the centre and the periphery, are changing and diminishing as a result of technological innovation (Agnew 2011). Whilst in this report we are insisting on the need to pay attention to the specificities of the rural, we acknowledge that it is at times challenging to draw clear distinctions between issues and experiences that are rural as opposed to urban; in a country as small and urbanised as England the urban and the rural are inextricably linked. Movement between areas takes place on a daily basis through work and other commitments, as does the transport of goods and services. People who are rough sleeping in rural areas may have recently left urban areas, perhaps driven away because of the expense of accommodation in the city, or attracted to the rural area because of the possibility of unskilled seasonal work. Alternatively they may be passing through a rural area on their way to the city. A survey respondent summarised the issues as:

*“Lack of resources, and the resources we have are in larger towns leading to migration of rough sleepers to those towns. Geographical neighbours are similarly rural and have similar lack of resources leading to a lack of beneficial sharing of what little resources are available, for example: London boroughs can share resources within a few miles, rural authorities do not have that luxury with transport infrastructure difficulties and the huge geographical areas.”*

One example of the blurring of the rural and the urban is the case of ‘county lines’. ‘County lines’ is a model of drug dealing which has emerged during the past 10 – 15 years in contrast with previous forms of street level distribution (Coomber and Moyle 2018). In the county lines model ‘drug dealers are engaging in outreach activity and travelling from their urban hub to provincial towns and cities within a wide radius of their home turf, not just to deliver their product to that location as a ‘weight’ but also to retail it there themselves’ (Coomber and Moyle 2018: 1324). Not only is the supply of drugs increased but vulnerable people are harnessed to undertake the supply operation at street-level. Dependent drug users, vulnerable women, looked after children, and adults with welfare needs are habitually targeted and recruited in a variety of front-line roles including as ‘drug runners’, ‘commuters’ and for ‘cuckooing’ - the practice of a drug dealer taking over a vulnerable person’s accommodation and using it as a drug dealing base (Coomber and Moyle 2018). Whilst people we talked to in the course of this research mentioned county lines as a problem, the scale of this research project did not enable us to investigate it further, but we consider it requires far closer academic attention as it is likely to have an increasing impact upon rural poverty and rural homelessness.

Despite this evidence of a blurring of rural and urban space, we gathered evidence of particular rural problems.

### Rough Sleeping

Specific challenges for people sleeping rough in rural areas include not being able to easily access food, water and other supplies. A common response from the people we spoke to who were currently sleeping rough in rural areas was that smaller rural shops charged higher prices, and often located too far away. Food banks in rural areas were also limited and often only open once or twice per week. Donations for food banks are often inappropriate as items need to be cooked, and most people sleeping rough do not have access to cooking facilities. There was also an interesting denial of the fact of rough sleeping in rural areas at all as well as ignorance about service provision. One of our survey respondents said:

*“There are more places to sleep in tents, cars and vans. We get a lot of people who do not realise they are rough sleeping. This is very different in urban areas where a higher proportion of people will sofa-surf. People are also much more removed from services by geography. There is a lack of knowledge about what services are where, what they do and how to access them. As a result, more people develop multiple and complex needs, fall victim to gate keeping, and their situations become more entrenched”.*

In rural locations we found that pets, in particular dogs, were important to combat loneliness and isolation, as well as being needed for safety and warmth. There is extensive literature on the importance of pets to people experiencing homelessness (Irvine 2013, Kerman et al 2019, Blomley et al 2020). Pet ownership can be problematic for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness as it can prevent people getting settled accommodation due to restrictions on pets in the private rented and social rented sectors. One of our professional interviewees told us that she was actively working on developing pet friendly accommodation. We think that pet ownership may be of greater significance in rural areas and may therefore pose a bigger obstacle to rehousing but we do not have the data to verify this. We suggest this could be the subject of specific research. One support worker hinted that they turned a blind eye

to pets being housed in temporary accommodation as they felt it helped people settle much more easily and was a source of wellbeing. A housing professional told us that they were developing accommodation which would allow pets as they recognised the need.

Rough sleeping in the countryside inevitably involves close contact with more settled residents and landowners, particularly farmers. Many of the people we spoke to had relationships with farmers, some of whom extended enormous amounts of goodwill and support to rough sleepers on their farmland. We saw examples of them providing access to clean water, offering cups of tea in the morning and allowing people to camp on their land. Some farmers were also frustrated by regulations that prevented them from allowing people sleeping rough to stay on their land, for fear of being criminalised by local authorities. We were not clear what regulations they were referring to. Not all farmers were positive about people sleeping rough on their land; some had experienced violence and aggression from trespassers and felt forced to contact police and local authorities.

### Hidden Homelessness in Rural Areas

Hidden homelessness is a commonly used term which does not have an agreed definition and can be used to encompass or even disguise a number of complex problems. It often refers to populations that are not visibly rough sleeping, such as those sofa-surfing, squatting, or living in unsuitable accommodation. The term has also been used to refer to minorities within homeless populations, such as LGBTQ+ or ethnic minorities, who are less likely to appear in statistical data. Referring to any type of homelessness as ‘hidden’ is problematic, as Pleace and Hermans (2020) have argued. Defining a person’s homelessness as ‘hidden’ does not reduce their vulnerability within the housing market and does not necessarily address the issues of exclusion they are likely to experience. It can also obscure the many reasons why different types of homelessness are not counted or included in official statistics. Many of the people we spoke with in rural areas described how much rural homelessness is not accounted for. There are



## Case Study **Resilience**

One person who had experienced homelessness in the past was able to live on a friend's dairy farm whilst doing an apprenticeship told us:

*"I grew up in a rural area and I very much felt that it was up to me to fend for myself, right? And I kind of think that is ok I guess....so it's about resilience as well and resilience of communities and resilience of people, though, I was homeless, I didn't not feel isolated, right? There was a community around me and for, you know, me. I could have been part of it if I'd wanted to be...but I think people who have a rural background might be less willing to seek help".*

People with experience of rural homelessness talked about how they were helped by community members, such as farmers who gave them access to land or water, and local people who offered them work. This willingness of support and resilience within rural communities was a lifeline for many who had experienced long term homelessness in rural areas. However this could shield these people from

view. Rural homelessness was an issue that needed resilience when services were not available, but that resilience kept the issue hidden from view.

A young person told us how he focused on survival:

*"I'm pretty screwed on, quite street smart, I know where I - I don't tell anyone my secret location. ... Cos I'm not getting mugged and I'm not getting stamped on and I'm not sleeping in a doorway. 'Cos I live in a tent or what I call a one-bed semi-detached, underneath a tree, out of the way of people, near the wood because that's how you've got to do it."*

He had really thought about what is necessary for survival:

*"Get some good boots, you know I could write a f\*\*\*\*\*g book on homelessness - Homeless for Dummies. Get a four season tent, cos come winter you're going to freeze your t\*\*s off in f\*\*\*\*\*g one season tent, especially the tents they give you here, they are s\*\*t. Sleeping bags here are s\*\*t, you've got to buy - you've got to spend at least £1,000 on stuff".*

a number of reasons for this. Visibility is more challenging in rural areas, in particular for people sleeping rough who hide in farmland or woodland. Those who would otherwise sofa-surf have limited options in rural villages, and may be forced to sleep rough for this reason. Sofa-surfing was seen as problematic by some of our participants.

One participant was concerned with the number of people relying on family and friends for housing, or 'sofa-surfers'. Another told us how the sense of community in the area can be a double-edged sword; people may be able to rely on others, particularly family, in the community, but at the same time, this reliance keeps people 'hidden' from homelessness services and local authorities for a long time. Others may simply be out of sight or relying on the good will of the community. John\* described some of the difficult situations he found himself in:

*'I've slept in abandoned hotels by the river, and under the bridge by the river, and woke up covered in snow...'*

*'One night I slept in an old car park, and the building that was at the back of McDonald's was an old garage and the people who owned it were letting us stay there in like that little garage. But 'cos we were looking after the place they agreed to stay there until he sold it, which they did say in the end and they knocked it down and built all that new motorway...but that was all, that was one of the best places we had. We could lock the door from the inside so no one could get in, and we had a carpet and mattresses on the floor with electricity going from there to the toilet.'*

One homelessness outreach team described the difficulties of engaging people in rural areas versus urban areas:

*'we don't want [our work] to be looking under the bushes. We want to know exactly who is where, and what they're doing so we can help'*

*'...one of the differences, if you were to compare us with a city, it would be, "Go and*

*find somebody in the doorway of Marks and Spencers." And the doorway of Marks and Spencers is fairly well defined. So from the office, you can go and find them, or at least find their sleeping bag. We get, "There's somebody sleeping in a tent on the riverbank. Well, going to find the tent on the riverbank will probably take you two or three hours, first to get there and then to search for the place. And also, try not to fall into the river at the same time.'*

### Youth Homelessness in Rural Areas

Young people face significant differences in their experience of homelessness generally, and also in rural areas. Finding housing for young people is a bigger challenge, due to age discrimination in the private rented sector, for instance many landlords do not accept tenants under age 26 (St Basils 2021). Cuts in benefits (discussed below) have particularly impacted upon young people and the limits placed on Local Housing Allowance for young people, their restriction to single room rates and the disadvantageous benefits rates for under 25 year olds creates further barriers. We heard reports of young people sleeping rough in rural areas, but accessing support during the day with relatives or friends because there are no services available to them.

Even if young people can get work, they remain at risk of homelessness. Mckee et al's research into young people's employment opportunities in rural areas indicated that they were 'lacking in comparison to larger towns and cities. Not only were job opportunities generally limited, participants highlighted a lack of well-paid, full-time, permanent positions as they perceived most jobs to be low-income and on a part-time and/or fixed-term basis' (Mckee et al 2017 :121).

Limited housing stock makes it extremely challenging for local authorities to find suitable accommodation for young people, or for young people to find accommodation for themselves, as most options are unaffordable, or too large or inappropriate in other ways. The housing stock is more homogenous in rural than in urban areas

with houses generally built for families, not for single occupancy or house shares (CLA 2022). Many young people are driven out of their local areas and into urban centres or towns where they might have more viable housing options. In the long term, this creates challenges for villages with ageing populations to maintain local economies. McKee et al argue for spatial nuance in housing research overall; existing literature suggests that while young people in general are facing housing and employment precarity, these challenges may be intensified for those living in rural places. Yet, despite this evidence, spatial distinctions are often overlooked in discussions of 'generation rent'.

A support worker told us about an issue with a young couple who were sleeping rough and in the early stages of pregnancy. They weren't married and due to priority need the pregnant woman was offered temporary accommodation. However her partner was not allowed to join her. For this reason the woman turned down the offer of accommodation as she didn't want to leave her partner.

Young families who had children in schools also face difficulties with the suitability of housing offers when it comes to being housed near current schools, support networks and child care. One housing professional told us:

*"...people wouldn't want to move schools. Yeah, the actual homeless legislation, it makes it clear that, you know, that isn't really a sufficient reason to refuse accommodation, but, you know, I'm a parent and I wouldn't want my children to move schools, and a lot of people might rely on family for child care. So, you know, it's all very well saying we can move, 15 miles away, but then if your child care is in a certain area and you rely on that to actually be able to go out to work in the cost of putting your child, in nursery would be more than you were using a lot of instances."*

## Experiences of Rural Homelessness

In this section we focus on what people experiencing homelessness or have recently

experienced it tell us about their experiences. We heard stories about isolation and loneliness, shame and resilience. People with experiences of homelessness told us about communities coming together to create support, and contrasting feelings of being 'outsiders', being spat on, tents set on fire and violence and abuse whilst sleeping rough.

### Isolation and loneliness

*'Rural homelessness is by far one of the worst things...nobody knows you're there, nobody cares you're there, you are on your own and you're just...free..'*

Rob\* was conflicted about his experience of rural homelessness. His mother had died when he was young and he suffered violent abuse from his step father. After working on funfairs and as a seasonal chef he became a carer for girlfriend and suffered several nervous breakdowns. He lived in the woods for 8 years, and felt it was on the one side the worst thing you could experience, but on the other liberating from the stresses of life, no one bothered him and he was able to live off the land. He would sleep in the woods and trap rabbits, but whilst there was a sense of freedom he also felt this sort of life was 'killing' him.

*'I made trenches, made sure they were water secure...out there all winters, one winter there was three foot of snow... I had to get up every hour and walk around...and I was really thinking, I can't do this, I can't do this.'*

Loneliness and social isolation brought other dangers too. Rob\* described how he was mugged by six people and suffered a brain injury and lost his teeth, he described how he then felt the need to 'get off the streets, 'because it was killing me'. For Rob, in addition to isolation he felt that stigma was a big issue 'as soon as someone looks down at you, as a homeless person, and walks off, that is the most degrading thing ever'.

We asked Fred\* a man who had experience of homelessness what the best thing to do to help people in his situation would be and he said

*“First thing is, talk to them. The homeless get ignored, everything thinks oh they’re homeless so they must be druggies and alcoholic and stuff like that...we’re not, talk to us, we’re lonely, just talking to us is nice sometimes...just don’t ignore us”.*

This participant had found long term accommodation through a charity. Now he was no longer on the streets and felt at home in his accommodation, he didn’t count himself as homeless. However he pointed out that he still referred to the community of people experiencing sleeping rough as ‘we’.

### Shame and Stigma

Another issue Fred described was shame. The shame and stigma people experienced whilst homeless was something that stayed with people long after they received meaningful support.

*“People said to me, weren’t you scared when you were homeless, and I said yeah, in the beginning I was. There were some days, three or four days, you wouldn’t eat...the one thing I didn’t like was every night, having to put your bit of cardboard down, and get into your*

*sleeping bag, and you knew people were watching you...people were staring at you, people were watching, that was the worst thing all together, I couldn’t stand that”.*

Another participant Ed\* shared his experiences of stigma he still suffers even as he is in supported accommodation.

*“To look at me, people wouldn’t realise that I’m agoraphobic and that I can’t stand being around people, and I’ve got severe depression...they only see the size of me and because I’ve been on drugs and where I live and they take an instant dislike to me. But that’s not me, that’s just something that’s happened. They need to get to know the person...don’t judge a book by its cover... this is their problem, they are projecting their own image”.*

Ed described how ultimately the thing that most helped him in the end was ‘people believing in me and being there for me and me being able to feel like I could trust someone.’





## Case Study **North Yorkshire**

Craven District in North Yorkshire is just south of Richmond, the current Prime Minister's constituency. It has a particular problem with second homes. As you approach Skipton from Leeds on the train you pass a number of locks on the canal, showing how the land rises to the Yorkshire Dales. Factory towns, small houses and tall chimneys are part of the post-industrial landscape,

and in the distance is the edge of the dales. Skipton is a small market town that relies on tourism to the Yorkshire dales. Despite a booming tourism industry, the 'economic vitality' of the town reportedly suffers from the lack of a young and enterprising demographic (Craven District Council Homelessness Strategy 2020-2025).

## 5. Drivers of Rural Homelessness

There are a number of factors that emerge from our research that indicate that rural homelessness is a growing and chronic issue that may well become acute in the near future. In this section we consider some of the structural and other issues that impact upon rural homelessness. Taking as our starting point the issues recognised by Cloke et al in 2002, we focus on how rural poverty and the lack of affordable housing contribute to rural homelessness, we then consider the overarching issue of governance of rural homelessness in a section which summarises the relevant local authority responsibilities, welfare provisions and issues relating to crime and anti-social behaviour, including county lines, before turning to recent major events, Brexit, Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis which have had a dramatic impact upon the context of rural homelessness.

Poverty is the single most important driver of homelessness in the UK (Fitzpatrick & Davies 2021) so inevitably rural poverty is a key factor in rural homelessness. Many people are surprised by the existence of rural poverty which, like rural homelessness, is characterised by its invisibility (Cloke et al 2002). This is in part because it is “widely dispersed rather than concentrated in limited geographical areas as in urban “blackspots” (Commins 2004:61) and in part because of its cultural invisibility. ‘There is a tendency to regard rural living as idyllic or ‘problem-free’, or the existence of problems is contested by ideologies which romanticise rural life and the rural environment’ (Commins 2004:61). For Cloke et al the unimaginability of rural poverty and homelessness has consequences;

*Rural spaces can be (re)purified against out-of-place people and practices, either by strenuous denial of the very existence of phenomena such as homelessness, or by purposeful exclusionary practices, designed to move the people, and the troublesome issue, on into its ‘proper’ urban place (Cloke et al 2002:80).*

Understanding the causes and scale of rural poverty and its distinctiveness from urban poverty is complex and problematic and an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this report. But it is important to note that whilst urban poverty dominates policy discourse there are poor people in relatively affluent rural areas of England. Our overview of existing research suggests that people in rural areas can be disadvantaged by limited social and economic opportunity, in particular the lack of educational opportunities and the dominance of low paid work, and by constrained welfare provision. In addition costs such as housing and transport can be higher than in urban areas (Cloke et al 2002, Milbourne 2004, Bernard 2019, Shucksmith et al 2021). This leads to social exclusion – the loss of the ability to connect with the services and facilities needed to fully participate in society. Shucksmith et al’s conclusions, from research carried out both before and during the pandemic, that many rural residents are at risk of poverty, while poverty is perceived as an urban issue and that the welfare system is not well adapted to rural lives (Shucksmith et al 2021:4) are very significant in the context of increasing rural homelessness.

### Rural employment

Local employment prospects in rural areas are often limited. As Shucksmith et al noted, in many instances ‘rural work is not ‘good work’, with incomes often volatile and irregular’ (Shucksmith et al 2021:4). Jobs tend to be concentrated in agriculture, tourism and services, sectors known for lower wages. DEFRA statistics published in 2020 indicate that workplace based earnings are lowest in rural areas in England. In 2020, median workplace-based earnings in predominantly urban areas (excluding London) were £25,400 while predominantly rural areas were lower at £22,900. This is distinct from residence-based earnings because many people living in rural areas work in urban areas in higher paid jobs. In 2020, the median residence-based earnings in Predominantly

Urban areas (excluding London) were £25,100, compared with £25,000 in Predominantly Rural areas. This is significant because whilst on average earnings have kept pace with inflation measured by the Consumer Price Index, which has increased by 21 per cent in the years 2009 – 2020, workplace based earnings have provided much more limited protection against inflationary rises. These figures were compiled before the post pandemic cost of living crisis (discussed below) and could explain why housing professionals believe that there are more people homeless or at risk of homelessness. The discrepancy between work-based and residence-based earnings (i.e. the difference between the earnings of those who work in rural areas and those who live in rural areas but work elsewhere) also explains why poverty can be invisible in rural areas. The problem of lower work-based earnings in rural areas is exacerbated by what might be described as a rural premium – the additional costs of energy, transport and housing.

### Energy costs and rural poverty

Individuals are defined as being in fuel poverty if they are unable to adequately heat their homes because of a lack of resources and/or because of the inefficiency of their housing insulation and heating (Boardman 2010). Rural households are particularly susceptible to fuel poverty because many of them are not connected to the gas network. This is due to their distance from the network, which forces them to rely on non-mains gas heating fuels that tend to be more expensive. Additionally, there are concerns about a lack of competition in fuel supply markets in rural areas, as noted by Roberts et al in 2015. The quality of rural housing stock tends to have lower energy efficiency standards with a greater likelihood of such homes being older, detached and built with solid walls so there is less possibility of making meaningful economies. In rural areas there is also a higher concentration of under-occupancy. This leaves ‘some smaller households in disproportionately large properties that require excessive heating to maintain adequate warmth’ (Robinson et al 2018: 80). Energy costs are also higher in private rented accommodation as

landlords have little incentive to invest in energy saving measures.

According to Roberts et al,

*‘Despite the higher probability of being trapped in persistent fuel poverty among urban dwellers, the impact of some of the characteristics already known to adversely influence the level of fuel poverty (living in a flat, and living in private rental accommodation) have an even more negative effect in rural areas than in urban areas. Moreover, they also indicate that an individual from an average rural household is more vulnerable to fuel price increases than an individual from an average urban area (Roberts et al 2015:217)*

Many participants who had experienced rural homelessness reiterated their struggle to access everyday necessities such as water, food and soap. Basic costs and lack of amenities or public facilities led one of our participants to wash clothes in a river. Below one of our participants compares the luxury of a bed and heating with the harsh reality they live with day to day:

*“...when I would stop in me friend’s flat, I actually felt like a queen. I was like, you know, heating, couldn’t get over it. A bed, literally a bed, but I tried sleeping in the bed but I got that used to sleeping on the floor. I got off and actually slept on the floor with a blanket. And like I’d just get up and have a shower or bath, I could wash me clothes any time I wanted. But now there’s no launderette in the town, obviously, I’ve had to use the river to wash me clothes in. I’ve actually gone up to [place], a little shop up town, I’ve had like £1.20, obviously, I bought like little bits and things like that and food. And I had £1.20 left so I bought a 69p bottle of liquid, just to wash me clothes in the river“.*

A housing professional described how one elderly man had been discharged from hospital and made contact with the local food bank in Hereford. However when the food bank went to drop off some

supplies for the man in his rural home, they found he had no heating and electricity.

### Affordable and accessible transport

As a result of austerity (discussed below) local authority subsidies to local transport have been dramatically reduced. The lack of access to affordable public transport plays a critical role in rural social exclusion and rural poverty (Berg and Ihistrom 2019). It provides a significant barrier to accessing services and employment. DEFRA's statistics on rural accessibility by walking and public transport for 2019 indicate that:

- The average minimum travel time to a hospital was a little over one hour in rural areas, compared with a little over half an hour in urban areas.
- Fewer than half the users living in rural areas have access to places with 5,000 or more jobs within 45 minutes, compared with 91 percent of users in urban areas.
- 51 percent of users living in rural areas do not have access to their nearest hospital (DEFRA 2019)

DEFRA's report also points out that for people living in rural areas, making the same journey by car compared with using public transport or walking, had the effect of halving the average minimum journey times. This considerably reduced the disadvantage experienced by those living in rural areas. It suggests that cars are necessary for a minimum living standard but this means that rural households face significant additional costs in order to achieve the equivalent standard of living as their urban counterparts. Smith et al argue that most rural working-age households would need incomes equivalent to 72% or more of national average (median) income. Those unable to afford a car are most likely to rely on buses. But rural bus services have been particularly badly impacted over the past decade. As one of our survey respondents said, in response to why rural homelessness is different from urban:

*“There are less services to start with. Due to distances, transport is a MAJOR issue. Lack of affordable public transport at useful times. Hubs in towns or accessing the Job centre are useless when people cannot get there. Phone and internet can be unreliable, leaving people very isolated. Services will not travel out to rural areas due to cost”.*

The Campaign for Better Transport also points out that:

- Cuts to national and local funding for buses have led to many services being reduced or withdrawn.
- Bus fares have risen much faster than rail fares or motoring costs.
- In many places buses are no longer frequent or reliable, and traffic on the roads can make journeys slow.
- Government messaging during the Covid pandemic damaged passenger trust in public transport and stay at home restrictions impacted on passenger numbers and bus operator revenue which is causing further cuts to services (Campaign for Better Transport 2023).

The CPRE - The Countryside Charity, argues that England should recognise a universal basic right to public transport, backed up with guaranteed service frequency standards, and the government should fund local transport authorities to achieve that level of service. Our research confirms that poor public transport has a very negative impact on rural homelessness.

One housing services officer told how the centralisation of resources and cost of public transport caused issues for keeping employment:

*‘...to rely on social housing, when it is such a finite resource, is very, very difficult in those areas and we have ever sympathy for those particular people, because we sometimes get people who split shifts, for example.*

## Good practice example: **Farmhouse accomodation**

Turning Tides has also leased a five bedroom farmhouse in 100 acres of National Trust land from another charity Lorica. This unique setting has meant that a person they supported had a solution to entrenched rough sleeping. Adrian who experienced homelessness after a family and mental health break down and slept rough in local woods for 4 years, now has a room which looks out

over the woods/fields from the farmhouse. Adrian has told them that it calms him when anxious and if becomes stressed he can walk straight out into the peace of the woods. He has been there over a year and has said that he feels the most settled he has been for many years.





## Case Study **Fred**

Fred\* described how he disguised himself when he was sleeping out on the streets by wrapping his head with scarves. He was afraid someone would recognise him. Fred\* became homeless after an amicable divorce. He moved into hotels, then as his savings dwindled, bed-and-breakfast, then sofa surfing, hostels and eventually found himself sleeping on the streets on a piece of cardboard with a sleeping bag. He slept on the streets of a large city where he

used to work on the public transport network. He refused to beg but was grateful when he woke up with a bag of hot food, a coffee or a sandwich next to his head. For him, the worst thing was the loneliness and lack of human connection. He eventually moved to a rural area with the help of a charity and found friends and a community. Now he likes the ruralness of the area, the peacefulness and waking up being able to see a badger out of his window.

\* Names have been changed to protect people's identities.

*So they might work a morning shift. Go home and then go back out and if they are homeless our temporary accommodations is in the main centre. So if they had to go into our temporary accommodation and they didn't drive, for example, then they would just have to give up their work because there's no way that public transport would allow them to make those kinds of journeys as well as the cost burden as well.'*

As Cloke et al pointed out in 2002, whilst 'homelessness is often about far more than a lack of housing, housing remains fundamental to its resolution. This is particularly the case in rural areas where there are quite simply not the housing options that exist in urban areas' (Cloke et al 2002:194). There is extensive evidence to suggest that the problems of rural housing costs and availability have intensified in the twenty years since Cloke et al's work was published.

Housing is much less affordable in predominantly rural areas. DEFRA statistics published in May 2022 suggest that the average lower quartile house price was 9.2 times the average lower quartile earnings, compared with 8.0 times in predominantly urban areas (excluding London) (DEFRA 2022). The Rural Services Network suggests that excluding London, the average house purchase price is £90,000 higher in rural areas than it is in urban areas. (Rural Services Network 2021). The most affordable form of home ownership, flats are rarely available in rural areas. Flats in rural areas comprise only 4% of the overall housing stock as compared to 63% in city centres (CLG English Housing Survey). Rather than flats developers focus on building larger homes on new market developments, because these secure a better financial return. The constrained supply of smaller homes, especially those that would be affordable or suitable for supporting living, compounds the challenges facing vulnerable and low-income households with little or no realistic housing options in rural areas.

The scarcity of affordable housing in rural areas is exacerbated by ownership of second homes and the increase in holiday rentals, particularly Airbnb. The CPRE - The Countryside Charity's

Chief Executive argues that there must be a 'government response to the fact that our rural housing supply is disappearing into an unregulated short-term rentals market that simply didn't exist six years ago.'

A Shelter blog provides a pithy summary of the crisis in home ownership in rural areas:

*In many rural communities, the market for housing has become divorced from local people and their incomes. Homes are sold for as much as people are willing and able to pay for them. In theory, this means that lower average rural wages should be reflected in lower rural house prices. But in much of the countryside, the market serves primarily second and holiday homeowners and retirees, who have far more to spend on housing than local workers. The market doesn't try to be affordable to local people, because it has plenty of demand from out of the area to feed on. As a result, house price to income ratios are out of control - 13:1 in Horsham, 10:1 in Central Bedfordshire, 9:1 in Cornwall and South Lakeland. (Rose Grayston Shelter blog July 6th 2018)*

With home ownership out of the question for many in rural areas, private renting is often the only option. But it has become increasingly inaccessible to those on low incomes or benefits. Whilst rental prices in general flatlined following the global financial crisis of 2009, real incomes fell, making private renting increasingly unaffordable. More recently rural rents, alongside all other rents, have increased since the pandemic. The cost of living crisis, increased interest rates affecting landlords' mortgages together with some evidence of a decrease in the supply of rented homes and increase in demand have all contributed to higher rents. Kovia Consulting, in research commissioned by the Rural Services Network found that:

*In 2021, on average, the percentage of monthly earnings spent on rent showed very similar levels of affordability in predominantly rural, predominantly urban (exc. London), and urban with significant rural areas (34%).*

*However, for households with the lowest income, rent was less affordable in rural areas. Workers in the 25th percentile for residence-based earnings spent 47% of their earnings on rent in predominantly rural areas, compared to 43% in predominantly urban areas (Rural Services Network 2022:20).*

In Cambridgeshire, one of our fieldwork sites, the university brings students and an elite middle class into the central urban area. This leads to high house prices and high rents which, when combined with the lack of social housing, means that many are priced out of the area. Support workers, usually earning around £24,000 a year, described this as 'social cleansing'.

Even for those who manage to access private renting, their housing situation remains problematic. McKee et al demonstrate their existence is stressful. Private renters experience a lack of control and insecurity which 'has significant impacts on subjective well-being. Security is pivotal to transforming a house into a home. But it also provides an important 'foothold' enabling people to get by, and get on, in life' (McKee et al 2020: 1477). In addition, 'the financial stress individuals were placed under to maintain their tenancy was also clear, with the relative cost of renting further contributing to people's precarious existence' (McKee et al 2020:1477).

There is limited social rented housing in rural settlements. According to the Rural Services Network 12% of the rural housing stock in England is social housing compared with 19% in urban areas (Rural Housing Alliance 2016). The Right to Buy initiative has had a particular impact. The Rural Services Network found that in rural areas only one replacement home was built for every eight homes sold and those replacements are rarely in the same settlement (Rural Services Network 2021). This is particularly problematic for those with strong attachments to place because of family connections or other reasons.

### Lack of emergency and move-on accommodation

People who are homeless require emergency and move-on accommodation but this is very limited in many rural areas and providers have to make difficult choices.

*"We've had to make people homeless in order to house homeless people".*

A support worker explained that in their area the local council lacked housing stock and a large number of homeless people were temporarily housed in B&Bs and hotels. A local church had run a night shelter during the winter months for those sleeping rough, but there were problems once the church was no longer able to provide this service. To provide this service itself, the council then had to convert one of their seven room supported accommodation properties into a night shelter with 17 beds. Consequently, a house which had been providing long-term support for seven people had to be used as a night shelter in order to accommodate up to 17 people nightly. This meant moving seven people out of their homes and into Bed and Breakfast - an expensive and unsatisfactory alternative.

One support worker in a city hostel told us about the lack of availability of services in rural areas:

*"We had this one lady who had lived in [village] her whole life, its a village in the county that is quite rural. Essentially her relationship with her husband had broken down. And so I think she became homeless in that area, but there just weren't any services there to support her, so she came to us".*

A housing officer told us about the issue with Section 21 evictions in rural areas:

*"people are left with eight weeks and they might have lived in a property for 15 years to then try and find somewhere else to live and if that is in a rural area, then you know, there should have more time to try and find accommodation where they want to be... because to put it bluntly, there are some areas*

*in this district where, you know, someone's more or less got to die before that property comes up. You know, it's heartbreaking, because there's, you know, there young families fighting for accommodation in areas where they just can't get rehoused.'*

## Planning, development, and building

There is an urgent need to improve the supply of housing in rural areas which is affordable for those earning local wages. Mechanisms for delivery of homes that are genuinely affordable in rural areas are limited by scale, opportunity, and conservatism.

### Planning

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out government policy on the development and building of new homes - this includes consideration of rural matters. Local planning authorities must operate their own planning policies within the constraints of the NPPF together with any relevant additional guidance. The NPPF provides local authorities with 'carrots and sticks.' The carrots are financial incentives, vital for local authorities that are still accommodating the impact of austerity and are otherwise reliant on local taxation or central government funding. Sticks include a controversial provision, the presumption in favour of sustainable development, which, in lay terms, means allowing more speculative building to make up any shortfall in homes necessary to meet house building targets.

### Affordable housing

Government policy acknowledges the affordability challenge of living in the countryside and the need to enable exceptions to secure land for affordable housing developments. Affordable home ownership is supported through schemes such as Help to Buy and Right to Shared Ownership, with large scale public subsidies above the investment in affordable and social rented homes targeted at lower-income households. A report by the House of Lords Built Environment committee calculated that the Help to Buy scheme would have cost £29 billion by its conclusion in 2023. This is a figure more

than double than the equivalent invested through the Affordable Homes Programme during the same period.

The 'affordable rent' tenure was introduced in 2008 and marked the shift towards lower levels of public grant for Registered Providers (Housing Associations). 'Affordable rents' means that rents set by Registered Providers are set at 80% of market rent, which is 15-25% higher than a social rent for a comparable property. These rent levels are necessary to support the financial viability of development and support higher levels of debt that Registered Providers have secured to fund investment in new homes, at historically low interest rates. But there is a fundamental flaw to the policy. In rural areas the low level of household income makes these 'affordable rents' unaffordable. There is state support available for households unable to afford the higher rents, either from housing benefit or the government's new single welfare payment system Universal Credit. However welfare support for rent is limited to a threshold known as the Local Housing Allowance. This is determined locally using (since 2009) the lowest 30th percentile of the rental market. In many rural areas this threshold is insufficient to cover private rent levels and in high value areas even falls below affordable rent levels. The repeated freezes to LHA levels in recent years have further reduced the support available. Given the level of demand for affordable housing, eligible households not fortunate enough to secure a home have been supported within the private rented sector, but again with support capped at the Local Housing Allowance. This means that substantial public sector funds have been paid to private landlords, which the National Audit Office calculated at £9.1b a year in their 2021 Private Rented Sector report. As in urban areas, the most common policy approach to securing affordable rural housing is onsite provision from market-led development. The mechanism, known as S.106 delivery (Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as amended), secures a quota of affordable homes as a condition of planning approval. These houses are generally then owned and managed by a Registered Provider. However current policy provides that

a proposed development must comprise at least 10 houses before the s.106 quota applies, unless the settlement is as a Designated Protected Area when this can be reduced to five or fewer. However almost 70% of small rural parishes (those with populations below 3,000) are not classed as Designated Protected Areas, reducing the value of the mechanism. Almost invariably the market sites made available in rural areas are small. Anecdotally the consensus is that there is a degree of 'gaming' by developers to ensure that thresholds are evaded and onsite provision of affordable housing avoided. Developers also argue that there is an absence of Registered Providers willing to purchase just a few homes and/or that s.106 requirements will make schemes unviable, in their efforts to avoid providing affordable homes, instead offering to pay a commuted sum. Nonetheless most affordable rural homes come forward via the s.106 route, with 4,446 being built in 2021-22 (DLUHC – LA Statistical Return Data). However this represents only 8% of overall affordable housing delivery nationally and is considerably lower than the level of rural population, which stands at 17.6% (DEFRA Statistical digest of Rural England).

The other, more rurally focused mechanism for providing affordable housing, is the Rural Exception Site Policy which is common to most adopted local plans. Sites are permitted across the countryside, including on greenbelt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and National Parks. The principles of the policy have remained broadly unchanged since its inception in 1988, allowing for small scale mixed tenure development on land outside of, but adjacent to existing planning boundaries – usually low-grade agricultural sites.

Rural Exception Sites are appraised based on a proven need for affordable homes locally and, as a rule, developed with a high degree of community engagement. Once planning is secured, arrangements are made to safeguard the affordability of the homes into the future and a degree of preference is given to local households when allocated. Over recent years, cross-subsidy has become more common to support the viability of rural exception developments which often have high build costs associated with design, scale, and

infrastructure. Land values are negotiated within a range that allows for a modest uplift on agricultural use but remains reasonable and supports proposals that the local planning authority consider to be viable and proportionate. Rural Exception Sites are mostly developed by Registered Providers, with 548 affordable homes built using the policy in 2021/22 (DLUHC – LA statistical return data). Along with quota sites, they are the mainstay of affordable rural housing delivery with both mechanisms key to achieving the 10% affordable housing target reintroduced by Homes England in 2020.

### Rural proofing

National rural proofing of housing and planning policy is limited and reflects the restrained role that the government's rural agency, DEFRA, can realistically play, despite its endeavours to hold policy shapers and makers to account. The continuation of the Right to Buy policy and the sustained focus on homeownership will inevitably limit the effectiveness of any efforts at rural proofing housing policy. Some local authorities have responded to the lack of affordable homes in rural areas by devising restrictive housing allocations policies, taking advantage of freedoms within the Localism Act 2011. As with national housing policy, the extent to which local authorities rural proof housing allocations varies, with households unable to afford to live in their home rural communities ending up winners and losers depending on how policy genuinely sought to accommodate the affordability of rural living.

### Constraints on the delivery of rural affordable housing.

Despite some of these successes, overall affordable rural homes have not been delivered on anything near the necessary scale. There are three main reasons for this. The first is local opposition. Anyone hoping to build even a handful of new homes, market or affordable, in smaller rural communities is likely to face vocal and coordinated local objection. Zealous conservationism and a culture of buying into the stigma associated with affordable homes and those that live in them are often at the core of such opposition.

The second challenge is securing a site. Housing delivery favours urban and larger settlements, where strategic or bigger scale sites can better meet home building targets. Smaller rural communities are quickly written off as not sustainable locations for development or fall outside of local planning authority land-supply arrangements. As a result mainly opportunities are limited to windfall, and even these often progress slowly due to limited local authority housing and planning capacity. Enabling a Rural Exception Site is not straightforward. Success is reliant on securing a site that

- a. lends itself to building homes
- b. is agreeable to planners and
- c. has the support of a landowner willing to sell for a reasonable uplift of current use value.

The third challenge is financial viability more generally. Scheme viability is impacted by

- a. Scale
- b. extent of infrastructure necessary to connect homes to services
- c. design and build quality requirements
- d. the need for and cost of environmental mitigations
- e. the level at which rents can be afforded, public grant agreed, and loan borrowing applied.

The extent to which these variables can be applied to a development, either through policy or what is practical on the site, will impact on the willingness to invest sparse resource in schemes that show limited value for money.





## Good practice example: **Warm Spaces, Churches and Food Banks**

In the winter of 2022, amid the energy and cost of living crisis, communities found spaces to invite people inside to keep warm. In a number of our field sites 'warm spaces' were opened at churches, community centres, charities and cafes. One Church, aimed to 'provide a safe, warm space', and volunteers served soup and bread for free at lunch time, then sold refreshments and cakes afterwards. Another Church hall had a sign outside inviting people in stating 'it's ok not to be ok'. Warm spaces such as churches, libraries and charity run cafes provided spaces for people to sit and sometimes get a hot drink or meal. We also found that communities were doing a lot together to support each other through times of need, in particular through food banks and churches where people gathered for purposes way beyond food. In two areas the food banks also tried to visit rural areas with mini vans or buses to provide for remote communities.

Food bank workers often consist of retired social workers and health workers, who volunteer and offer support, advice and help to people in need, including help to complete welfare benefit applications and informal counselling. Many workers reported that the demand for food banks had doubled or tripled in their areas, in particular families with children, and that there has been stark increases in people with learning disabilities needing support as they are not reaching thresholds for social care. In one area a food bank worker told us that 'People come here to cry about childcare, housing, money, food and mental health. We get an awful lot of tears'.



## 6. Contemporary issues

### Welfare cuts and austerity

One key change over the years between Cloke et al's research published in 2002 into rural homelessness and the current conditions is the impact of the decade of austerity which followed the global financial crisis of 2009 and the election of the Coalition government in 2010. Austerity measures included restrictions in local government funding and wide-ranging cuts to benefits. As Hoolachan et al observe, 'these reductions, along with the insecure labour market, have left some at risk of greater stress and hardship; forcing them further into poverty' (Hoolachan 2016: 76). There are several strands to welfare cuts worth noting in the context of rural poverty and rural homelessness.

- The institution of the benefit cap, designed to ensure that out of work benefits do not exceed average weekly wages, the shift to uprating benefits via by the consumer price index from the previously used retail price index and several years of below CPI increases have all had a detrimental impact on benefit levels
- Benefits for housing costs have been considerably limited as a result of Local Housing Allowances being limited to the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of local rent levels as opposed to the median and facing year on year freezes in its value. Additional factors include the increased deductions for non-dependents, benefits limited to shared accommodation rates for under 35s and the introduction of the bedroom tax
- The introduction of Universal Credit designed to increase incentives to work and the intensification of the conditionality of benefits
- Reduction of state support for young people particularly the abolition of the Child's Trust Fund, Educational Maintenance Allowance - a means tested benefit designed to support

young people with the costs of staying on at school, and tripling student fees to £9,000.

- People who are subject to immigration control are generally prevented from accessing welfare benefits including Universal Credit and from housing assistance. This bar, known as 'No Recourse to Public Funds' was extended in 2012 and was recognised by the House of Commons Committee on Housing Communities and Local Government as a serious obstacle in responding to street homelessness post the pandemic (discussed below).

Another casualty of austerity was Supporting People. Launched in 2003, in its original form it provided a £1.8 billion ring-fenced grant to local authorities for the purpose of funding housing related support services to help vulnerable people live independently. It was used to support a wide variety of provision including refuges, care leaver support, support for people leaving institutions and support for people who have been living as homeless to set up their own home. However in 2009 the ring fence was removed from the grant which enabled local authorities to spend their Supporting People allocation as they deemed appropriate. In the 2010 Spending Review significant cuts were announced to the programme. This combined with the cuts to local authority funding set out below has had a serious impact on the provision of services that helped prevent and/or assisted those living as homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Central government funding of local authorities has fallen considerably since 2010 which explains in part why Supported People funding became diverted from housing support. The National Audit Office reported in 2018 that there had been an estimated 49.1% cut in real terms to the entire Supporting People program between 2010 – 11 and 2017 – 18 (NAO 2018). Research by WPI Economics

and St Mungo's, found that council spending on support for single homeless people specifically in England fell by 53% between 2008-9 and 2017-18, and argued this was a contributing factor to rising levels of rough sleeping in this period. In a 2018 LGA briefing it was noted that these cuts happened at the same time as growing demand for services and additional burdens have been imposed upon local government. It concludes that 'Leaving councils to pick up the bill for unfunded government policies, at the same time as managing spending reduction and such growing demand for services, is unacceptable' (LGA 2018).

Already existing problems were considerably impacted by the pandemic which had a dramatic impact upon revenue, for instance commercial income from car parks and leisure centres fell, and there were difficulties in securing rental income from commercial property. The result has been significant cuts to the discretionary services provided by local government whilst it prioritised as far as possible statutory and more acute services. A 2022 report by the Institute for Government concluded that, in the last decade,

*The scope of the state has shrunk locally, across England. Within smaller budgets, councils have had to concentrate spending on statutory and demand-led services such as homelessness, waste collection and concessionary bus passes. This came at the expense of preventative and universal services such as children's centres, subsidised bus routes and housing programmes to help vulnerable people to live independently (Atkins and Hoddinott 2022:4)*

Research by Watts et al provides a close examination of the impact of austerity on homelessness prevention services run by Newcastle city council and its partners. They observe that despite great efforts by the local authority, and an impressive track record of homelessness prevention, 'The current context is particularly pernicious in this regard, with local authority efforts to prevent homelessness directly limited by national policies that increase homelessness risk and restrict local authorities'

capacity to respond effectively to it (Watts et al 2019:144).

## Covid-19

Glass et al, in the context of a wider research project into rural lives, produced a report in 2021 on the consequences of Covid-19 and lockdown on those living in rural areas. They concluded that:

*The national lockdown that began in March 2020 delivered a huge shock to rural economies and societies, most obviously through the temporary closure of many businesses and the loss of earnings to employees, self-employed and freelance workers. These impacts reinforce the importance of diversifying rural economies that rely heavily on tourism and hospitality, and of promoting 'good work' which offers a reasonable, secure income (Glass et al 2021:2).*

Their research provides an important context to our own project. Our findings focus on the consequences of policy initiatives relating to rough sleeping and private renting.

## Everyone in

Covid-19 presented particular risks to homeless populations because of the difficulties of self-isolation in hostel accommodation, and the vulnerability of homeless populations who experience multiple morbidities and are particularly susceptible to respiratory illness (BMJ 2018). In response, at the very beginning of the first national lockdown, on 26th March 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government launched its Everyone In initiative. This required local authorities to provide Covid-19 secure accommodation to rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping to protect public health and control transmission. Everyone In is generally celebrated as a success. The National Audit Office estimated 33,139 people were brought into accommodation as at end of November 2020 (including those who have no recourse to public funds) and Covid-19 infections and deaths were relatively low with only 16 deaths of homeless

people identified as involving COVID-19 in the first lockdown (National Audit Office 2021). There also appears to have been a quite surprising amount of success in moving people from hotels and into settled accommodation, with an estimated 26,000 people being housed either with a private tenancy providing a minimum of six months security or by being offered supported housing or social housing.

However Everyone In raised some important issues which have long term implications for housing and homelessness policy:

- Whilst the accuracy of the numbers of people helped can be debated (LSE 2021) there is no doubt that the scale of rough sleeping and those at risk of rough sleeping is much greater than the government had previously estimated.
- There was an increase in first time people sleeping rough during the pandemic probably as a result of people being evicted from lodgings or sofa surfing because of lockdown and those people who lost their jobs because of the pandemic and who therefore could no longer afford housing. Whilst it was anticipated that this increase would be temporary, the cost-of-living crisis (see below) that followed the pandemic suggests that the problems may be more long term.
- Dealing with people who have No Recourse to Public Funds has proved problematic. The first iteration of Everyone In explicitly included those with no recourse to public funds, but moving people who have no recourse to public funds into settled accommodation is problematic because they cannot claim benefits and are likely to struggle financially to move into the private rental. The House of Commons HCLG Committee concluded that 'No recourse to public funds has been an obstacle to reducing rough sleeping for a long time: the pandemic has just shone a spotlight on its impact. If the Government is serious about meeting its manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024, it must reform the no recourse to public funds policy'

(HCLG 2021)

- Shortage of affordable housing is an inevitable blocker in finding move on accommodation.

The Public Accounts Committee, in a report published in March 2021, whilst noting the remarkable success of Everyone In in limiting infection transmission and deaths among a very vulnerable population, concluded that

*This initiative has also exposed gaps in the Department's approach to tackling rough sleeping. The Department has a target to end rough sleeping by May 2024, but does not have a strategy for achieving this outcome or maintaining it once met; nor does it have a clear understanding of how it will measure and report on progress. The scale of effort required to achieve this target may also be greater than previously suggested: the number of people accommodated in the first ten months of Everyone In (37,430) was nearly nine times the number of rough sleepers recorded in the Department's last official snapshot before the start of the pandemic (4,266). This also raises further questions about whether the Department's funding of local authorities to achieve its objectives is adequate and sufficiently long-term*

For our professional interviewees responding to Covid 19 was a watershed experience.

'I suppose what Covid has done is demonstrate that if you throw money at the problem, homelessness can be resolved, because that's the issue.' (Support Worker,)

During Everyone In, some support workers found that without 'tolerance' and understanding that came through spending time with people and wrap around care, it was impossible to keep people safe. The usual policies around the behaviour in temporary and supported accommodation were too tricky for people to adhere to, particularly when service users had complex needs and were not used to living in their newly granted accommodation due to long periods of time spent sleeping rough. It was only through tolerance and

understanding, perhaps more afforded during the unfamiliar period of the pandemic, that support workers were able to maintain people in their accommodation.

*‘There’s only a certain amount of time we can actually dedicate to that and support we can put in place. And that’s been my argument, is we’re – we’ve done great throughout Covid. And we’ve housed a lot of people who’ve never been housed before. But if we don’t keep them in their accommodation, all of that doesn’t matter...and some of that actually requires almost that you go and live with them and be their buddy’*

*I think we’re tolerant because we understand the big picture of all of the things that go on around them. We don’t look at them in isolation... we see all the other services that are involved. So we understand the big picture...it makes us more tolerant, because we really know the whole thing. We’re not just seeing that person in isolation as a housing officer’ (Support Worker)*

### Private renters

It was not just those who were sleeping rough who were impacted by Covid-19. People renting in the private rented sector were also vulnerable because of their limited security of tenure. In most cases, outside of the initial six-month period or where there are fixed term agreements, private sector landlords can evict someone providing them with only two months’ notice. Lockdown and furlough inevitably placed private renters at a high risk of eviction. However, Robert Jenrick’s pledge on twitter that, “no one should lose their home as a result of the coronavirus epidemic” gave a strong indication that private renters would get protection<sup>4</sup>. What the government did was to ban evictions except in specific cases during the pandemic period. The exact details of the eviction ban differed at different stages of the pandemic. The Housing Communities and Local Government Committee in its review of the eviction ban noted housing lawyers’ criticism of the complexity of the legal adjustments (HCLG 2021:23). It recorded

evidence from Giles Peaker, Partner at Anthony Gold Solicitors, who criticised the ‘hotchpotch of interventions and last-minute secondary legislation that is very hard for anyone to grasp’. What particularly concerns housing advisers is that there is nothing in place to help renters who built up arrears during lockdown. This may well mean that there will be an increase in homelessness in the near future as private renters cannot afford to reduce their arrears. As Simon Mullings, representing the Housing Law Practitioners’ Association (HLPAs), pointed out to the HCLG, there is a lack of “long-term strategy about how to protect the sector”.

### The cost of living crisis

The cost of living crisis has rapidly succeeded the pandemic as a significant risk factor in homelessness. For a number of reasons, most particularly the war in Ukraine which has caused energy and grain shortages, inflation is high and there has been a rapid increase in the prices of basic commodities (ONS 2023). Rural households may be more affected by current price rises than other regions because of rural vulnerability to high fuel costs, high food prices and high transport costs, all of which we have discussed above. The Rural Services Network, which commissioned research into the differential cost of living between rural and urban areas (Rural Services Network 2022) is now collecting data from rural residents about the impact of the cost of living crisis on them. [Suffering from the rural cost of living? Make your thoughts known in household survey - Rural Services Network \(rsnonline.org.uk\)](https://www.rsnonline.org.uk), We expect the results of the survey to confirm that rural households are significantly more impacted than urban households.

### Adult social care

Adult social care faced a number of problems prior to the pandemic. Over the decade between 2010 and 2020 research by the Kings Fund identified that the key problems comprised means testing, catastrophic costs, unmet need, poor quality of care, workforce pay and conditions, market fragility,

<sup>4</sup> Robert Jenrick on Twitter: “Thank you @Shelter - no one should lose their home as a result of the #coronavirus epidemic.” / Twitter

disjointed care and the postcode lottery and argues that they have all been exacerbated by Covid-19 (The Kings Fund 2020). Since the pandemic there are particular problems around unmet need and there is no long term solution proposed to the staffing crisis in adult social care. There appears to be little data on particular problems of Adult Social Care in rural areas, although it is established that the demographic in rural areas is older, which means that care needs are more likely (Skinner et al 2021). Shucksmith et al suggest that in rural areas adult social care is placed under particular strain due to the 'greater distances that care workers need to travel, staff shortages and the higher costs of formal provision at home' (Shucksmith et al 2021:18).

During our research we spoke with social workers in rural areas where they explained that the system is at the brink of collapse, and they can only provide support to the absolutely most acute cases. Many of their clients do not meet the threshold requirements for adult social care and therefore the demands on NGOs and local organisations to support people at risk of or experiencing homelessness who have complex needs is far greater. People working in rural food banks told us that those accessing their services had social care needs far beyond the need for food. Many provided emotional and wellbeing support, and many reported undiagnosed or unsupported mental health needs. In one location a retired social worker unofficially supported people with care needs through the food bank on a weekly basis as a volunteer.

### Brexit and migration

In 2018 Crisis and Homeless Link commissioned a report on the potential impact of Brexit on homelessness as a policy area. The report makes several important points; 'The underlying causes and the harm caused by homelessness do not distinguish by nationality, so nor should support for people at risk of homelessness and identified the risk that EU nationals, particularly those who are homeless may fail to apply for settled status or temporary residence permits. It identifies several risk factors, for people failing to

apply, it could be because 'they are unaware of the need to do so, fear being rejected, are mistrustful of interacting with officials, or are unable to afford the fee (no more than the cost of a UK passport – currently up to £85 – a significant sum for those on low or no income). The fact that the application process is expected to be solely available online may also prove a barrier for EU nationals that are homeless with no internet access or low computer literacy'.

Our findings revealed an increase in migrants within the homeless population. In one area the local authority noted an increase of European migrants who were now sleeping rough as they did not gain settled status following Brexit, and consequently do not have recourse to public funds. A housing and homelessness manager from another local authority told us that, 'The EU/Brexit legislation and the Citizen's Rights Act has changed the way that we deal with EU migration. So there are people now who are finding themselves destitute for brand new reasons. It's kind of that we've never had to deal with before, so it has made things more complicated'. Some of our respondents also raised concerns regarding increases to the number of people from Ukraine displaced by the war whose temporary housing with British families has come to an end. Organisations and local authorities across the country are now warning that there may be a drastic increase in migrant populations at risk of homelessness.



## Case Study **David**

David\*, a 47-year-old man with a replacement hip and severe mental health issues, described how he felt ashamed to use a food bank, whilst also receiving social welfare benefits. He had to spend most of his benefits that month on a new pair of glasses so he could see, as his eyesight was so bad he had taken a few falls. He had disagreements with his mother whose house he had been staying in and now he was sleeping rough with only £20 left for the month. He explained that the price of food was going up in the supermarkets and the money wasn't going far so he went to the food bank. He explained his desperation:

'It was my eyes or my health...I just said I'm with a doctor and everything now

and the doctors that want to refer me to the mental health and things like that because I've tried to commit suicide '

He was able to receive food packages from the food bank and was regularly checked on by one of their volunteers. However, he described how he wasn't eating enough and his stomach was swollen. The doctors had sent him to the hospital to check for bowel cancer, but he didn't have the money to get the train to the hospital, so he would have to jump the fare, which he didn't like to do. David expressed guilt and shame for using the food bank, having no choice but to spend his benefits on new glasses, and the thought of having to jump the train.

\* Names have been changed to protect people's identities.

## 7. Emerging Themes

### Inequalities, intersectionality and social injustice

In this section we draw together some of the key themes that have emerged from this research and make suggestions for future research priorities.

The themes that we would like to emphasise are:

- Inequalities in rural areas may not be obvious to the casual visitor or the resident who works elsewhere but they are deeply embedded, have been exacerbated in recent years and place rural residents for whom home ownership is out of reach at serious risk of homelessness.
- The intersections of disadvantage and vulnerability with rurality intensifies the risk of homelessness and makes homelessness much more difficult to respond to
- Whilst homelessness in rural and urban areas are distinct problems there is significant movement between the rural and the urban and a clear interdependence between the rural and the urban which suggests there are policy implications and opportunities for innovation
- Whilst there is clear evidence in our research of the individual resilience of those experiencing homelessness there is a particular shame and stigma attached to being homeless in areas of affluence which can intensify the barriers to support.
- Rural homelessness and the precariousness of rural housing provides a useful lens for us to understand inequalities and social injustice more generally

#### Inequalities

Our review of the literature and our field work has demonstrated the embeddedness of rural poverty despite its invisibility. Traditional employment in rural areas is poorly paid and often seasonal. More well paid employment is difficult to access

because of limited transport options. There are also limited educational and training opportunities. The literature also discusses the rural premium, the additional costs that those who are resident in rural areas face, such as higher energy costs and more expensive fuel and food costs. Housing is a particular source of rural inequality. House prices are unaffordable for those who are working locally who face competition for housing with those who commute for work to rural areas as well as competing with those who buy houses as second or holiday homes. As a result of the reduced supply and high demand rents are high. Yet rural poverty is invisible because many people living in rural areas have high incomes from working elsewhere. The problem of rural poverty has been exacerbated by welfare cuts and by cuts to local government funding. Local government has responded by cutting funding for discretionary services, yet these are the services that sustain rural populations and their absence has been acutely felt.

The pandemic hit rural economies hard, and the cost of living crisis appears to be having a particularly deleterious impact. So the rural poor are in jeopardy and our research shows that this has contributed to the increase in rural homelessness. Whilst homelessness is often the consequence of poverty and structural disadvantage there can be multiple compounding factors. The interface of these factors is described as intersectionality and is discussed below.

#### Intersectional disadvantage

Our research has shown that within homelessness provision in rural areas, there is a lack of services for groups who are known to be more likely to experience homelessness. For example, there is inadequate provision for people who identify as LGBTQ+ (Tunaker 2023), those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Bramley 2022), people with disabilities (Housing Rights Watch 2018) and migrant populations (Bramley et al 2021). Specialist support is most likely to be located in



## Case Study **John**

John\* is 27 years old and has been rough sleeping for 3 months. He is currently sleeping in a tent on private land. He is type 1 diabetic and insulin dependent, and he has incontinence issues as a result of diabetes. He needs to keep his diabetes medication in a fridge and he has mental health issues as a result of his diabetes and rough sleeping, so he requires specialist mental health support. The local authority goes out to see him regularly and offers support, but he does not want to take up offers of support that are too far from his own local area. He does not feel confident to travel far distances due to his incontinence and being too far away from his support network.

He gets fresh water and use of a fridge from the landowner whose land he is sleeping on and buys food from a local shop but this is expensive and takes up a lot of his benefit payments. His outreach worker has explained to us that John's situation is challenging as John's own needs to stay local and familiar to his area, as well as his need for a self

contained home/flat, along with his age reducing his eligibility for higher rates of housing benefit mean he is excluded for a longer period of time as the system is set up such that out of area placements for temporary accommodation are deemed as appropriate despite his clear need to stay as close to the local area as possible. His outreach worker has explained that medical professionals are very concerned for his wellbeing as his ability to manage his health in a rural location are reduced without access to affordable transport.

His outreach worker was able to negotiate temporary accommodation centrally in the end and a private landlord sourced appropriate accommodation - the local authority covered any shortfall in rent and John's benefits were maximised so he could afford the diet he requires and became eligible for higher rent benefits as a result of receiving Personal Independence Payments (PIP). His outreach worker also managed to apply for a free bus pass based on his disability.

\* Names have been changed to protect people's identities.

urban centres, which in some cases means several hours journey from a rural location. This makes minorities even more vulnerable in rural areas, and less likely to seek or acquire appropriate support. As one of our survey respondents explained:

*“As a mainly rural area we do not have access to many of the services that urban areas have. Decreasing funding tends to centralise provision in urban areas.”*

Nearly 16% of our survey respondents highlighted that mental health support services are missing in their area. 28% of our respondents also noted that what they need in order to tackle homelessness in their area, aside from affordable housing and more homelessness services, is increased funding for prevention services.

Another respondent said:

*“Urban areas tend to have a network of agencies working closely within a close proximity to provide the support required across a range of issues. This is much more difficult to achieve in rural settings due to the area it would have to cover and the difference in population density”.*

Another summarised the issues in rural areas compared to urban as follows:

*“Less specialist support for addiction and mental health crisis. Little or no supported accommodation. Little or no 16/17 year old accommodation. Public transport makes accessing work, health and support services expensive”.*

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed existing ‘multiple and interrelating structures of inequality’ (Maestriperi 2021: 1) that together make some people more susceptible to homelessness than others. Homelessness prevention needs to focus on groups that are likely to experience marginalisation, microaggressions and discrimination in society. Unfortunately, these groups are least likely to find specialist support in rural areas. Our research respondents have also

highlighted the specific needs and concerns of the Gypsy/Traveller communities who experience marginalisation and multiple discriminations (Greenfields 2017 Richardson and Codona 2016)). The 2002 Homelessness Act requires each local authority to consider the needs of Gypsy/Traveller community in its homelessness prevention strategy. However, according to many of our respondents in rural areas, this community remains at high risk of homelessness and lacks support.

Our research suggests that problems faced by the elderly and the young are exacerbated in rural areas. It also highlighted that women’s homelessness is an increasing demographic within rough sleeping, often linked to domestic violence and abuse (see Bretherton and Pleace 2018), In rural areas women are likely to be even more invisible/hidden, and less likely to find the support they need. 7% of our survey respondents suggested that domestic violence and abuse is one of the three main drivers for the increase in homelessness in their area.

### The rural and the urban

This research is highlighting the causes, the responses to and experiences of rural homelessness. There are three points we wish to make here. First in no way are we suggesting that there should be competition between the rural and urban for scarce resources. Our point is that policy makers have overlooked rural homelessness because of its invisibility and it needs to be recognised as a significant and distinct social problem. Second, we understand that urban and rural homelessness are connected in a multiplicity of ways, not least because there is a movement of those experiencing homelessness and housing precarity from the rural to the urban and vice versa. We did not have the resources in this project to document those journeys but we consider them important from a policy perspective. We would also encourage innovative partnerships and the sharing of good practice between urban and rural services to respond more generally to homelessness. Finally the failure to recognise rural homelessness as an issue demonstrates a failure to understand the characteristics and consequences of rural poverty and rural housing precarity which in turn increases

the risks of experiencing homelessness in rural areas.

### Shame and stigma

One particular characteristic of rural homelessness that our research revealed is that those experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness feel ashamed and stigmatised by their position. The shame and stigma of being homeless or at risk of homelessness in rural areas adds to the problems of accessing services. It certainly contributes to the invisibility of homelessness in rural areas. It is also likely to exacerbate the trauma that people experiencing homelessness suffer. The relationship between trauma and homelessness is fully discussed in the literature (see for instance Maguire et al 2009, Someville 2013, Woodhall-Melnik, et al 2018).

Several people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness told us that they tried to hide themselves away from scrutiny. Stigmatisation was experienced as people not caring. As one respondent said:

*“They don’t care to tell you the truth, as long as they can go home to a warm loving home and things like that and, you know, have a cooked meal and all that, they don’t care about the people what lives on the streets”.*

Behaviour often went beyond stigmatisation. Some of our respondents were assaulted whilst they slept on the streets. In general people reported that understanding and compassion were much more common in urban areas; people would buy food and check up on people sleeping rough and in general were experienced as more generous.

### Housing and homelessness as a lens on rural inequality

The final theme we wish to identify in this research is that looking at rural homelessness and the experiences of those at risk of homelessness, we learn as much about inequalities in rural society as we do about rural homelessness itself. We live in a society where home ownership is the marker of social inclusion. In rural areas those who cannot afford to own homes are doubly excluded.

They have failed to conform to the rural norm of home ownership and they are highly unlikely to be able to afford to rent secure and decent accommodation or be given social housing. What our research shows is that rural inequalities are increasing rapidly, this not only increases the risk of rural homelessness but also may lead to social destabilisation. The causes of rural homelessness and the scale and effectiveness of interventions need to be investigated urgently to avoid any further escalation of inequalities, social injustices and social exclusion.

### Further research

This was a small scale research project which, whilst we made important findings about the increasing prevalence of rural homelessness and rural housing precarity, also revealed the need for further research particularly in the following fields

- Housing affordability and housing economies in rural areas including community attitudes to new affordable housing developments
- Rural poverty following Covid 19 and the cost of living crisis
- The impact of the criminalisation of behaviours associated with homelessness
- Urban/rural trajectories of homelessness and precarious housing
- Community responses to homelessness, precarious housing and rural poverty
- The role of pets in the lives of rural people at risk of or experiencing homelessness

## 8. Recommendations

- The rise in rural homelessness is a strong indicator of rural deprivation. We need more information about its scale and distribution. As part of levelling-up there needs to be a renewed political commitment to ending all homelessness including rural homelessness and other hidden forms of homelessness. Part of that commitment must be an acknowledgement of the 'rural premium' which is unaffordable for the rural poor and places them at risk of homelessness.
- There is a sharp divide between the housing that is available in rural areas and the housing that is needed. Genuinely affordable housing must be a priority for rural areas. It is time for a radical rethink of what it means for housing to be affordable, and how affordable housing is provided in rural areas.
- Local Housing Allowances do not work in rural areas. Support for rental costs has to be more targeted and the government must be confident that huge sections of the rural population are not priced out of housing. Move-on accommodation must be available and affordable. Saving money on housing allowances is short sighted as the long term costs of homelessness are very high.
- There needs to be a long term commitment to providing flexible, multi-disciplinary prevention services in rural areas. Mental health services are a priority. Joined up thinking and innovation must be encouraged through pilot projects, mobile services and one-stop shops. The successes of Supporting People prior to 2009 needs to be evaluated and what worked best in those early years of Supporting People replicated.
- Local networks, local knowledge and the experience, commitment and innovation of local government, third sector and informal and community providers need to be mined for workable solutions.
- Waiting for those experiencing rural homelessness to contact services is not good enough. Providers need to understand and eliminate the barriers people have in accessing their services and be proactive in reaching out to those in need.
- The provision of sustainable, reliable and affordable public transport links between rural and urban areas and market towns must be a priority. Effective public transport would reduce costs on service provision as it would be easier for people to access those services, and will help sustain employment.
- Listening to those who are experiencing, have experienced or are at risk of experiencing homelessness in rural areas - those experiences provide vital underpinnings to effective policy making

# Good practice example: Housing with Employment and Wrap Around Care

Amongst people we interviewed who had experienced homelessness, and housing professionals, there was a strong desire for sustainable long term housing solutions that provided 'more than just a roof over the head'. A number of those who had experienced homelessness emphasised the positive aspects of wrap-around care they had received and the desire for meaningful activities for those in supported or temporary accommodation, alongside a supportive community of people they could trust.

Emmaus in Cambridgeshire is a self sufficient social enterprise which is part of a larger network in the UK. The site offers long term accommodation

to people who are experiencing homelessness alongside full time work in its recycling warehouse, gardens and shop. Those that join, referred to as 'companions', work alongside volunteers and staff and are involved in jobs that range from sorting books or textiles, fixing and delivering furniture, repairing computers and tech equipment to be resold, growing produce in the garden or making and sorting things to sell in the shop and cafe. The organisation operates on the principle of 'solidarity' and provides access to services such as mental health support and employment training opportunities.





## 9. Acknowledgements

We would first and foremost like to dedicate this report to people who are currently experiencing homelessness in all forms in the UK, particularly in the countryside, and to those who work tirelessly to support them. We hope that this report can bring about much needed change. Thank you to everyone who gave their time and expertise, whilst experiencing hardship and rural homelessness.

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# 10. Appendices

## Appendix A - List of Steering Group Members

The research has been commissioned by a rural homelessness task force co-chaired by Martin Collett and Rory Weal, bringing together experts from organisations listed below.

[English Rural Housing Association](#)

[CPRE The countryside charity](#)

[National Housing Federation](#)

[Homeless Link](#)

[Hastoe Housing Association](#)

[Action with Communities in Rural England \(ACRE\)](#)

[The Rural Services Network](#)

[Citizen Housing](#)

[Trent and Dove Housing](#)

[The Rural Housing Alliance](#)

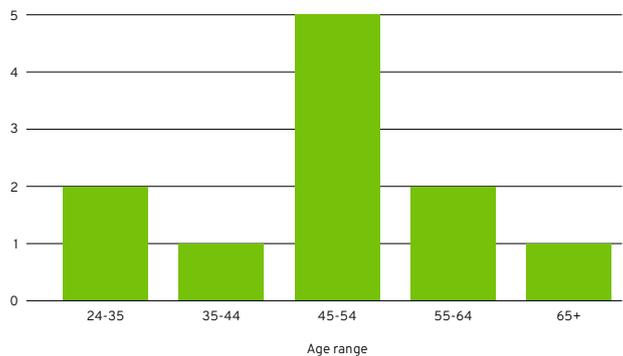
Church of England Public Policy Team

Susan Eastoe

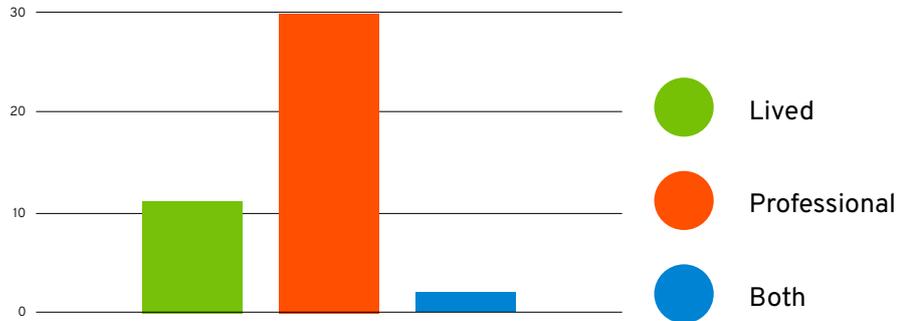
Jo Richardson, Prof. of Housing & Social Inclusion, DMU, Leicester

# Appendix B - Interviewees in Ethnographic Research

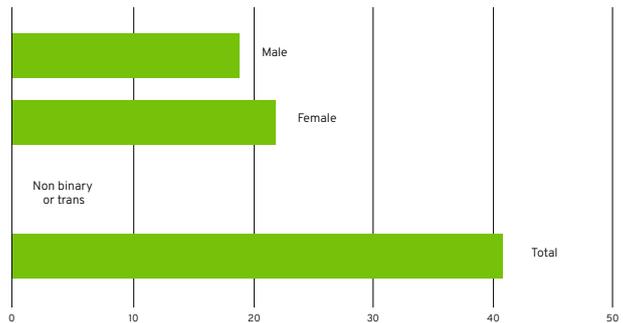
## Interviewees with lived experience of homelessness



## Interviewees with lived experience of homelessness



## Total Interviewees



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**Southampton**