

Lichfield District Council

Severe weather emergency protocol for rough sleepers

1. Background

Whilst there is no legal requirement for councils to provide shelter for rough sleepers during severe weather, Lichfield District Council strongly believes there is a humanitarian obligation to provide emergency accommodation to rough sleepers during extreme weather to prevent injury and death.

In addition to the direct risk associated with severe weather, the actions people might take to get out of severe weather can also increase the risk of harm and death. People might find cover in unsafe places e.g., large bins, which can result in crush injuries or death if the bin is emptied. They might enter buildings or property without permission, including derelict structures, with associated risks around fire safety and building collapse. People may also increase their substance use as a coping mechanism during bad weather. Attempting to keep safe and dry in extreme weather increases the risk of death and injury to people without shelter.

The council's [housing, homelessness and rough sleeping strategy 2019 – 2024](#) reinforces the council's commitment to supporting rough sleepers during severe weather.

2. Purpose of the protocol

Severe weather emergency protocols (SWEPs) for rough sleepers set out the arrangements to be made to ensure people are not at risk of dying on the streets during severe weather, by ensuring rough sleepers have access to accommodation at night during periods of severe weather.

The council's housing team supports rough sleepers into accommodation when the severe weather emergency protocol (SWEPE) is active, based on reports of rough sleepers made to the council.

The provider varies depending on the local context of services and housing supply and can include B&B, supported, hotel or hostel accommodation.

3. Trigger for protocol

The protocol will become effective during severe weather, which is defined as:

Cold Extreme cold can cause serious health problems and death for those who are exposed overnight or for long periods of time. Historically, SWEPE provision was triggered when the forecast was zero degrees or below for three days. It is now best practice to take a common-sense approach, where any forecast approaching zero is considered. The impact of rain, snow and wind chill are also considered, and the 'feels like' temperature is checked, along with conditions underfoot (e.g., ice).

Wind High winds can lead to an increased risk of injury through uprooted trees, falling walls, dislodged pieces of roofing and other debris. This is a particular issue for rural areas where people are, for example, sleeping in tents.

Rain Heavy or sudden prolonged rain can lead to flooding and landslides. People sleeping under bridges, on riverbanks, streams or canals may be particularly at risk, but there may be less obvious flood risks, for example drains or gullies. Standing water, puddles and flooding may continue to be a risk after rainfall has stopped. As well as increased risk of drowning, being stuck in the rain and unable to change out of wet clothes/shoes can lead to a range of health problems, including trench-foot. There is also an increased risk of loss or damage to belongings such as identification documents.

Heatwaves Climate change means that we can now expect more instances of dangerous hot weather. People experiencing homelessness face some of the worst health outcomes and in periods of extreme heat, are at higher risk of developing heat-related illnesses. People sleeping rough may find it difficult to source drinking water and sun protection, increasing risks around dehydration, sunburn, and sunstroke. Needs are likely to be more urgent during

daylight hours, so a different approach to SWEP may be appropriate e.g., free water and sunscreen, cool daytime spaces, and links to healthcare.

How we activate the SWEP

Our housing options team is responsible for activating the protocol.

The team adopt a common-sense approach and use resources including weather forecasts <http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/forecast/322/?area=Lichfield> and weather health alerts issued by UKHSA in partnership with the Met Office.

The team check the weather conditions before 12noon every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to determine whether to activate the protocol.

With regards to cold, the team will activate the SWEP when the lowest temperature (including predicted) drops to 0 degrees on any one day. During the working week the team will look two days ahead when considering whether to activate the SWEP, whereas on a Friday the team will consider the full weekend (including any bank holidays).

What we do when the SWEP is activated

Once the SWEP is triggered, the housing team will email all relevant voluntary and statutory organisations that may come across rough sleepers by email. The council's website is also updated: www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/swep

The out of hours service is also notified that the protocol has been triggered.

Once activated the housing team will review daily and keep partners updated, including when the SWEP is deactivated.

4. Eligibility criteria

To be eligible for emergency housing when the protocol is triggered, a person must be at risk of sleeping rough and be willing to accept the assistance offered.

Sleeping rough is defined as: *people sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments) and in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or "bashes").*

5. Procedure

Subject to the above criteria, any rough sleeper will be offered accommodation for the duration of the severe weather, i.e., whilst the SWEP is active.

Rough sleepers who are referred to the housing options team will be offered a variety of accommodation based on availability and a risk assessment. This could include emergency bed and breakfast, hotel, supported accommodation, hostel accommodation (which could be outside of the district) or local temporary accommodation.

Outside office hours, referrals are handled by the out of hours service, supported by the director on call. The out of hours service notifies the housing options team on the next working day so that ongoing support can be provided.

All rough sleepers accommodated under the protocol are referred to appropriate support services.

Any rough sleepers provided with temporary accommodation when the protocol is in force are encouraged to make an application on the grounds of homelessness, so that they can be considered for a referral to the homelessness and rough sleeper housing pathway scheme. They are also encouraged to apply for housing benefit to meet the cost of ongoing accommodation both under the SWEP and any longer-term arrangements.

The protocol is only active whilst the severe weather conditions continue.

Rough sleepers accommodated under the protocol are notified as soon as possible when the SWEP is deactivated.

If there are incidents of anti-social behaviour, or any other behaviour likely to breach the occupancy conditions of the temporary accommodation by any rough sleeper, the provision of temporary accommodation are reviewed.

Separate arrangements are made for any animals that a rough sleeper may have if they cannot be accommodated in the emergency accommodation.

Dogs are placed in kennels used by the council. Arrangements for this are made by the housing options team in conjunction with the environmental health team.

6. Financial implications

The cost of emergency accommodation for rough sleepers will be met through the council's budgets should the rough sleeper not be entitled to housing benefit.

Where eligible, all occupants will be required to submit a claim for housing benefit, to mitigate the cost to housing services.

Kennel costs are met by the council.

7. Monitoring and review

Monthly performance indicators are monitored as part of the housing services dataset including:

- The number of rough sleepers housed during severe weather
- The number of nights for which accommodation is provided
- The cost of placements

Further monitoring will be carried out to establish:

- How many of those accommodated had a local connection
- How many of those accommodated had no recourse to public funds
- The nationalities of those accommodated
- What happens to those accommodated after the SWEP is no longer active

The protocol is reviewed on an annual basis by the housing and homelessness manager.

Any questions email housingoptions@lichfielddc.gov.uk

Last reviewed: December 2024