

# Briefing | Is the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) failing homeless young people?

## Context:

In England, a humanitarian policy called **Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)** is in place in response to extreme weather conditions. It can be activated autonomously by local authorities with the primary objective of safeguarding the lives of homeless people living rough on the streets. Most of the SWEPs are activated for three consecutive nights by weather forecasts of temperatures ranging to 0°C or below. However, the protocol is flexible and should take a common-sense approach and consider weather warnings, near-freezing temperatures, heavy and prolonged rains, extreme wind, and associated chill factor.

The formal housing eligibility and entitlement frameworks are not considered under the SWEP. Any person rough sleeping and in dire need of a safe and warm place, who cannot afford to live indoors (except cars, sheds, barns, garages, etc.) is protected under the SWEP.

The Pan-London SWEP is the agreed protocol over 33 London councils. **A weather forecast of below 0°C in any part of the capital results in the activation of SWEP all over London.** The rough sleepers are provided with temporary shelters and enter the 'In for Good' policy, where they are supported with food and shelter until a suitable future support plan is in place.

**Exposure to cold temperatures has several negative physiological effects on the human body** including increased blood pressure and risk of clotting, immune system suppression, and decreased capacity to fight off infection in the lungs. This can have a direct effect on our health and increase the risk of hypothermia, respiratory disease, influenza, heart attacks and strokes. Homeless people experiencing rough sleeping are more exposed to cold temperatures and are therefore more at risk from these effects. While SWEP is automatically activated in London when temperatures reach 0°C, these dangerous effects on health can occur at outdoor temperatures as mild as 4 - 8°C. This suggests that greater consideration and clarity around the temperature at which SWEP is activated is needed.

## Recent findings:

Recent ONS statistics have highlighted an **8 per cent increase in deaths of homeless people** (741 estimated deaths in 2021, including 31 of young people aged 15-24).<sup>1</sup> With a decline in the proportion of deaths linked to drugs and alcohol, deaths due to suicides and diseases, including COVID-19, are on the rise. As mentioned earlier, the exposure to extreme cold weather could worsen the impact of different diseases, increasing the risk of death.

**In December 2022, the Pan-London SWEP was activated and remained in place for 12 days, the longest continuous period since 2017.**<sup>2</sup> In total, more than 650 homeless people were hosted in emergency accommodations, five times higher than any SWEP activation period in the previous winter. However, looking at recent CHAIN figures about homelessness in the capital, this accounts for only one sixth of the 3,570 rough sleepers identified in London in the period September-December 2022.<sup>3</sup>

During the Pan-London SWEP activation period in December 2022, our Helpline received a call from a 15-weeks pregnant young woman who had recently become homeless. She told us that when she approached her local council for support, despite being in priority need due to her pregnancy, the homelessness assessment appointment she was given was not for three weeks' time. She ended up sleeping in her car that night with below 0°C overnight temperature. The day after, our Helpline highlighted the case to her local council. Her assigned housing officer had initially been unaware of the activation of the Pan-London SWEP. Unfortunately, once they had recognised the need for the young woman to be accommodated in SWEP accommodation, all the spots were already occupied for the night. Eventually, thanks to our Helpline's insistence, she was placed in an overnight shelter under whose standard rules would not usually accept to house her, but did so in this instance as it was the humane thing to do. This example is just one of the instances highlighted by Centrepoint Helpline in recent months about young people not being accommodated during SWEP activation period.

Outreach teams from our partner organizations highlighted that in order to access SWEP accommodations in London rough sleepers must be verified and registered on CHAIN.<sup>4</sup> Young people can only be verified if they have met an outreach team while they have bedded down and this might be challenging if they have started rough sleeping very recently. Moreover, young people are more likely to be sofa surfing, squatting or sleeping in the public transport network (e.g. night buses) and experience more hidden homelessness situations, therefore being more difficult to identify by outreach teams. Unfortunately, as reported by outreach teams, many young people are not registered on CHAIN as it might be one of their first nights rough sleeping and are not known to the outreach team in the borough, therefore they are not eligible for SWEP.

With anthropogenic climate change impacting global weather patterns, the United Kingdom is expected to experience warmer summers and wetter winters.<sup>5</sup> Climatic phenomena such as heatwaves, droughts, winter storms, heavy rainfalls and floods, are also going to be more likely. Considering these expected trends, it is crucial to **scale up and adapt SWEP to different extreme weather scenarios** in order to be better prepared in pursuing its main objective: preserving the lives of those vulnerable individuals who do not have a safe place to call home and are forced to live on our streets.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.london.gov.uk/more-650-people-sleeping-rough-helped-sweep-activation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

<sup>4</sup> <https://homeless.org.uk/what-we-do/streetlink-and-chain/chain/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/climate-change/effects-of-climate-change>

## Recommendations:

### The Government in cooperation with Local authorities should:

- 1.** Issue guidelines for SWEP activation and minimum standards for SWEP accommodations. These guidelines should not only consider below zero temperatures as an activation mechanism, but also include considerations of other harmful weather factors (e.g. storms, heavy rainfalls, strong wind). In addition, a SWEP policy specific for extreme hot weather should be created.
- 2.** Support the creation of coordination mechanisms for SWEP activation on the model of pan-London in other areas of the country and create a page on a government website with a live map indicating the local authorities where SWEP is active.
- 3.** Improve the accessibility to SWEP accommodations for people in hidden homelessness situations, for instance by providing support organisations with a list of public buildings, such as day centres, that they can share with rough sleepers where they can show up and be pre-screened and registered by outreach teams to access SWEP accommodations.

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