

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol Activity in Winter 2022/2023

A London Councils briefing

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Introduction

This last winter was a harsh one, particularly so for those sleeping rough on the streets of London. The frequent and lengthy periods of sub-zero temperatures posed significant, potentially life-threatening, dangers. It required deeper commitment than ever from the rough sleeping sector to keep people safe indoors and support them off the streets for good. It also highlighted major challenges for boroughs, charities, and other partners in providing appropriate shelter and in using the severe weather as an opportunity to end people's rough sleeping for good.

This briefing discusses the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) activity to protect rough sleepers across London in the winter December 2022 – March 2023 and in particular, the arrangements put in place by London's local authorities to provide 2,000 SWEP placements during the severe weather, as well as highlighting some emerging operational challenges.

What is SWEP in London?

SWEP is an emergency response designed to protect the lives of rough sleepers during periods of severe weather. London's 32 boroughs and the City of London signed up to the current SWEP protocol in 2018. Under the protocol, SWEP is activated by the Mayor of London/GLA when there is a threat of loss to life due to weather conditions (i.e. when the Met Office forecasts the temperature to be 0 degrees Celsius or below).

Under the protocol, the first operational priority is to offer shelter to rough sleepers to ensure their safety and well-being. The second priority is to use the opportunity presented by the move into emergency accommodation to find a way to support rough sleepers to stay off the streets – this is known as the *In For Good* principle.

Offering SWEP provision is a crucial activity for the GLA, local authorities, charitable service providers and voluntary organisations. It is also a key area of focus for *London's Life Off the Streets* rough sleeping programme (jointly chaired by London Councils and the GLA).

SWEP activations in 2022/23

This winter was one of the harshest in recent years for those sleeping rough across London. SWEP was activated six times in total:



A survey of London local authorities in January 2023 suggested that, during the first December activation, 949 people were accommodated by London boroughs in a mixture of nightly paid accommodation, hostel voids, shared sites and rest centre facilities. 310 of these were kept in accommodation when SWEP ended. A significant proportion (unknown as far as the survey is concerned) went to Crisis at Christmas, as SWEP ended the day before Crisis at Christmas opened.

In January, a further 680 people were accommodated by London boroughs in a mixture of nightly paid accommodation, hostel voids, shared sites and rest centre facilities. 311 of these rough sleepers were kept in accommodation when SWEP ended. Hundreds more (not covered by the survey) were accommodated during the four subsequent shorter SWEP activations.

Six local authorities reported having to resort to offering 'rest centre' type accommodation due to the shortage of bookable hotel/B&B accommodation and an absence of spare capacity in hostels and Temporary Accommodation. Rest centres are usually only delivered during disaster relief/emergency resilience operations and offer shared accommodation which, typically, isn't open during the day. London boroughs struggled to identify the sites and the workforce needed to support the rest centres that were operational and the majority of those accommodated were not offered *In For Good* accommodation once rest centres closed.

A further 348 people were accommodated over the two long SWEP activations by the GLA, more than double the number accommodated in the whole of winter 2021/22.

The *In For Good* initiative meant many positive outcomes were achieved with those who were accommodated during SWEP this winter. Of the people with a SWEP stay recorded on the outreach database CHAIN, 70 per cent weren't seen sleeping rough again following their SWEP stay (as of 1 April).

However, there is significant variation in *In For Good* outcomes recorded between boroughs, with close to 90 per cent success in some and less than 50 per cent in others. This relates both to the local availability of accommodation, whether or not rest centres were used (these could not remain open once SWEP was deactivated) and the proportion of rough sleepers in each locality without recourse to public funds.

Neither local authorities nor the Mayor are funded under the government's Rough Sleepers' Initiative for their SWEP provision. General homelessness prevention funding has to be used to pay for placements. This has proved challenging for local authorities already struggling to meet demand for housing and homelessness advice. Partners agree that greater funding is required to enable improved and innovative accommodation-based service offers and long-term options are needed for rough sleepers without recourse to public funds.

Growing challenges

Due to the early, protracted and repeated activations of SWEP, this winter was a challenging one, not just for rough sleepers at risk, but also for officers, staff and volunteers across London who worked to provide over 2,000 off-the-street placements in hotels, hostels and emergency shelters for rough sleepers during the extended periods of sub-zero temperatures accompanied by snow, ice and winds in December and January.

Typically, SWEP services are additional to the 'business as usual' activities of staff and there were many instances of staff working extra hours and additional late shifts over the severe weather periods.

In the context of a post-pandemic economy, with tourists returning to London in much larger numbers than previous winters, many boroughs reported shortages of emergency hotel and B&B spaces, repeatedly having to make placements out of their borough. The increase in distances between locations of rough sleepers and the bed allocated to them makes it less likely that those sleeping rough will accept an off-the-streets offer. The significant reduction in beds available was matched by a significant increase in costs. Local authorities in London are having to respond to rising statutory homelessness numbers in their areas as well as experiencing shortages in available Temporary Accommodation linked to the Home Office block booking hotels and other forms of accommodation for asylum seekers.

The number of rough sleepers with limited or no recourse to public funds has increased in 2022 and 2023, meaning not just additional pressure to find additional SWEP beds, but increasing difficulties in making SWEP an *In For Good* experience for this cohort.

The sum total of the difficulties led to the establishment of shared rest centres offering basic facilities and limited specialist support in settings and locations that were often difficult to manage and keep secure and which were not always popular with those sleeping rough and which represent a greater risk in terms of Covid.

Solutions

As challenging as this year's winter was for rough sleepers and the services protecting and supporting them, it is possible that similar weather conditions will recur in the future. The winters of 2017/18 and 2020/21 were also hard and the climate is becoming increasingly unpredictable.

The challenges set out above and the certainty of future severe winter weather require increased government funding to reflect both the enhanced SWEP activity undertaken by London boroughs and the GLA and the collective commitment to end rough sleeping for good.

Increased funding must be accompanied by increased co-ordination between housing, social care and public health leaders during SWEP activations to deliver accommodation and support-based services to those who might not otherwise come in, supporting these vulnerable rough sleepers into positive long-term outcomes, regardless of their previous situation and status. This especially applies to rough sleepers with restricted eligibility for public funds who face the option after every period of SWEP of returning to the streets in destitution.

It is also important to note that, in response to climate change's impact in making periods of severe hot weather more likely, the GLA is also currently reviewing evidence and developing guidance for local authorities on preserving life and supporting rough sleepers during severe hot weather activations.

Conclusion

The SWEP protocol is vital in protecting vulnerable rough sleepers during periods of severe weather conditions in the capital. London boroughs, the GLA, and other partners work together effectively to provide off-the-street placements and longer-term interventions to support those who are sleeping rough.

As our shared commitment to end rough sleeping and improve outcomes for rough sleepers develops and strengthens, we face challenging economic and market conditions, meaning that uplifted central government funding is required, in return for ever more effective and innovative services.

The SWEP protocol will be reviewed and refreshed for the future with boroughs ahead of the next winter season to ensure that vulnerable rough sleepers receive adequate support and accommodation. In particular, work is underway to make sure that where rest centres need to be offered as a way of meeting needs, they are delivered to the highest quality, with appropriately experienced staff and volunteers, and in locations that lend themselves to the delivery of the full range of expected support services.

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