

# ROUGH SLEEPING TRACKER

A plan to restore control, order, and hope to London's streets

**12,938**

The number of people sleeping rough over the course of 2025/26 in London. The number of rough sleepers has increased by 60 per cent since 2015/16, by 55 per cent since 2021/22, but has fallen by two per cent since 2024/25.

**5,667**

The number of rough sleepers in London with non-UK nationalities in 2025/26. The number of non-UK national rough sleepers in London has increased by 58 per cent since 2021/22 but has fallen by seven per cent since 2024/25.

**3,184**

The number of rough sleepers in London who have been seen on the streets for at least two years in a row. Just 16 per cent of people seen sleeping rough secured a long-term accommodation outcome.



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# About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions.

The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential. The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report, *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

# Foreword

London is one of the greatest cities in the world. But it also has some of the starkest inequalities. The most visible of these is the capital's rough sleeping crisis.

Not a day passes without rough sleepers outside our stations and on our high streets. It is one of the starkest signs of a system that is not working.

The last Labour government showed that it does not have to be this way. In government, we reduced rough sleeping by three quarters. This was a monumental achievement, and one that changed our communities for the better, giving hope to thousands.

The new homelessness strategy has the opportunity to deliver a change of similar scale. But it must go further and faster to scale-up the most proven intervention to end rough sleeping - Housing First.

Labour mayors in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region show what can be achieved by rolling out Housing First. Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram have taken hundreds of people off the streets for good and have led a progressive transformation of their regional homelessness systems.

Housing First begins with a simple but powerful principle: a permanent home. From that foundation, individuals receive the tailored, wraparound support they need to exit homelessness for good, and address the complex challenges that so often accompany it, including addiction and mental ill-health. Over the last decade, it has been shown to be the most effective and well-evidenced intervention to end homelessness for Britain's most entrenched rough sleepers.

I welcome this report by the CSJ, which sets out how the government can commit to doubling the number of Housing First places in England by 2030. Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region have shown the way. Now the Labour government has the opportunity to be just as bold, and to make a tangible difference to the lives of the most vulnerable people in our country.

The homelessness strategy has begun to reverse years of rising rough sleeping. Now it must turn the tide in full and scale-up the most proven intervention to end homelessness for good.



**Margaret Mullane MP**

Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

# Executive summary

Rough sleeping is falling in London but remains at a near record high.

12,938 people were subject to a night on the streets in 2025/26, a two per cent fall since 2024/25.<sup>1</sup> The number of people seen sleeping rough in London is still 60 per cent higher than in 2015/16, and 55 per cent higher compared to 2021/22.<sup>2</sup>

While overall numbers have fallen, there is a growing proportion of long-term rough sleepers trapped on the capital's streets. One in four (25 per cent) rough sleepers have been seen for at least two years in a row, compared to just one in five (20 per cent) two years ago.<sup>3</sup>

The longer a person sleeps rough, the more difficult it is to provide a permanent route out of homelessness. These individuals are also more likely to develop complex needs like drug and alcohol addiction. Over one in three (34 per cent) rough sleepers in London have more than one of alcohol, drug, and/or mental health support needs, an increase from 32 per cent in 2024/25.<sup>4</sup>

Rough sleeping is also changing, becoming increasingly entangled with the UK's immigration and asylum system. Although the proportion of confirmed non-UK nationals seen sleeping rough has fallen from 53 per cent in 2024/25 to 51 per cent in 2025/26, the number of people seen sleeping rough with unknown nationalities has continued to rise, increasing by eight per cent since 2024/25, and by 127 per cent since 2021/22.<sup>5</sup> Once people of unknown nationality are counted, the share of rough sleepers confirmed as British drops to just two in five (42 per cent).<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the number of Brits seen sleeping rough has slightly increased from 2024/25, with an additional 13 British rough sleepers seen this year – building on a longer-term increase of 1,521 – or 38 per cent – since 2021/22.<sup>7</sup>

A fall in the number of non-UK nationals seen sleeping rough has largely been led by a decline in European nationals seen rough sleeping. The number of European nationals seen sleeping rough has decreased by 14 per cent compared to 2024/25, while confirmed non-European nationals seen rough sleeping fell by two per cent.<sup>8</sup>

Falling numbers of European nationals sleeping rough, continuing a post-Brexit trend, mask an underlying failure to tackle rough sleeping in London. Although overall totals have fallen by two per cent compared with 2024/25, there has been no progress in reducing rough sleeping among British nationals, while the growing number of rough sleepers of unknown nationality signal a deepening crisis of migrant homelessness.

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1 Greater London Authority (GLA), CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

These figures pose a serious challenge for the government and Mayor of London, the latter of whom has promised to end rough sleeping by 2030. While the government's homelessness strategy includes positive measures on homelessness prevention, new duties for public services to collaborate, and nearly £3.5 billion of investment,<sup>9</sup> its approach to long-term rough sleeping is underpowered, with no commitment to expand the most effective intervention – Housing First.

Moreover, beyond a pilot in four council areas, improvements to data sharing, and a new training package for frontline staff,<sup>10</sup> there is scant detail on how the government plans to reduce, and ultimately end, rough sleeping among non-UK nationals.

In this report, we identify how the government and Mayor of London can strengthen their respective homelessness strategies and continue to drive a reduction in rough sleeping numbers. This requires immediate action from central government, beginning with a targeted expansion of Housing First in England, a new approach to tackling non-UK national rough sleeping, and a stronger commitment to prevention by tackling the root causes of poverty.

## Scale-up Housing First

The government should launch a targeted expansion of Housing First in England, to deliver 5,571 places by 2030/31. Housing First is the most effective and well-evidenced intervention at ending homelessness for Britain's most disadvantaged and entrenched rough sleepers.

Across city-region pilots in England, 84 per cent of service users sustained a stable home after three years,<sup>11</sup> and it has been shown to be 3.5 times more effective than conventional interventions.<sup>12</sup> Without a commitment to scale it up further, the government will struggle to meet its commitment to halve long-term rough sleeping.

Our plan to provide 5,571 Housing First places would more than double current capacity and take thousands of long-term rough sleepers off the streets by the end of the Parliament – a visible example of national renewal for a new Prime Minister.

CSJ analysis suggests that this would cost £103 million over four years, providing a 2:1 return on investment in savings to public services, through reduced spending on homelessness outreach, criminal justice costs, and the NHS.<sup>13</sup> We propose funding this roll-out through a ringfence in the new Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse Grant (HRSDAG), mirroring the way that certain funding is reserved for prevention. The government should fund Housing First by removing relocation expenses for civil servants, cutting the costs of the programme that moves officials to the regions, and redirecting a small proportion of the existing homelessness grant.<sup>14</sup>

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9 Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG), A National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025, pp. 11-13.

10 Ibid, pp. 45-56.

11 MHCLG, Evaluation of the Housing First Pilots: Final Synthesis Report, October 2024, p. 31.

12 Campbell Tickell, LCRCA Housing First Pilot: Local Evaluation, April 2022, p. 9.

13 Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), No Place Like Home: Scaling up Housing First in England, July 2025, p. 55.

14 Ibid, p. 56.

## Enforce immigration law

The government must restore control over non-UK national rough sleeping, by being willing to enforce immigration law, and by meeting its legal obligations to those owed support. Our plan draws on a successful pilot in the Netherlands, where municipalities have successfully supported migrant rough sleepers back into work, or to return to their country of origin.<sup>15</sup>

We propose the government tackle non-UK national rough sleeping and enforce immigration law by:

1. Resolving the immigration status of non-UK nationals sleeping rough by setting a new legal duty on local authorities and frontline homelessness services to work with the Home Office.
2. Enforcing immigration law by ensuring every frontline homelessness service has a working relationship and dedicated point of contact within the Home Office's Voluntary Returns Service.
3. Setting a preferential option for voluntary return by introducing a new priority outcome metric for local government on reconnecting non-UK nationals sleeping rough to their home countries.

## Tackle the root causes of poverty

Preventing rough sleeping from occurring in the first place requires cross-government action to tackle the root causes of poverty. *A National Plan to End Homelessness* recognises the relationship between the root causes of poverty - family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, addiction, and problem debt – as causes and risk factors for rough sleeping.<sup>16</sup> In this section we draw from recent CSJ publications to outline 15 recommendations that would strengthen the government's ambition to better prevent homelessness.

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<sup>15</sup> Significant Public, *Evaluatie Kortdurende Opvang Dakloze EU-Burgers: Eindmeting*, June 2024.

<sup>16</sup> MHCLG, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, December 2025, pp. 43, 76.

# Rough sleeping data review

Rough sleeping is a specific type of homelessness where someone is bedded down in the open air, in buildings, or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, sheds, and stations). Rough sleeping is the most dangerous and visible form of homelessness.

Rough sleeping is associated with multiple complex needs. The *Rough Sleeping Questionnaire 2025* found that 93 per cent of respondents had more than one support need, with over one in three (36 per cent) experiencing a current mental health issue, reporting an adverse school experience, and a substance misuse need in the past 12 months.<sup>17</sup>

In this tracker we analyse data from the multi-agency Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) about people seen sleeping rough in London. CHAIN is the UK's most detailed and comprehensive source of publicly available data on people seen sleeping rough. The CHAIN database also estimates the total number of people seen sleeping rough over the course of an entire year, a figure that is not available at a national level.

In February 2026, we analysed the national rough sleeping snapshot, published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on people seen sleeping rough in England. Please see this report for the latest yearly data on rough sleeping in England.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.1 Total number of people seen sleeping rough and support needs

### 1.1.1 Yearly totals

In 2025/26, the number of people seen sleeping rough in London was 12,938, a decrease of two per cent since 2024/25. While there has been a slight fall in the last year, the number of people seen sleeping rough is 55 per cent higher than 2021/22, and 60 per cent since 2015/16.

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<sup>17</sup> MHCLG, *Rough sleeping questionnaire 2025: Headline findings*, November 2025.

<sup>18</sup> CSJ, *Rough Sleeping Tracker: A plan to restore control, order, and hope to British streets*, February 2026.

Figure 1: The number of people seen sleeping rough in London per year



Source: CSJ analysis. GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

The London borough with the highest number of people seen sleeping rough was Westminster with 2,583 people seen sleeping rough. 20 per cent of all people seen sleeping rough in London over 2025/26 were in Westminster.

Table 1: The number of people seen sleeping rough per London borough

Local authority	Number of people seen sleeping rough
Westminster	2,583
Camden	974
City of London	757
Ealing	642
Southwark	613
Lambeth	571
Tower Hamlets	557
Brent	530
Croydon	527
Hounslow	513

Source: CSJ analysis. GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

## 1.1.2 The profile and support needs of people seen sleeping rough

CHAIN data categorises rough sleepers by if they have been seen sleeping rough in previous years. These categories are:

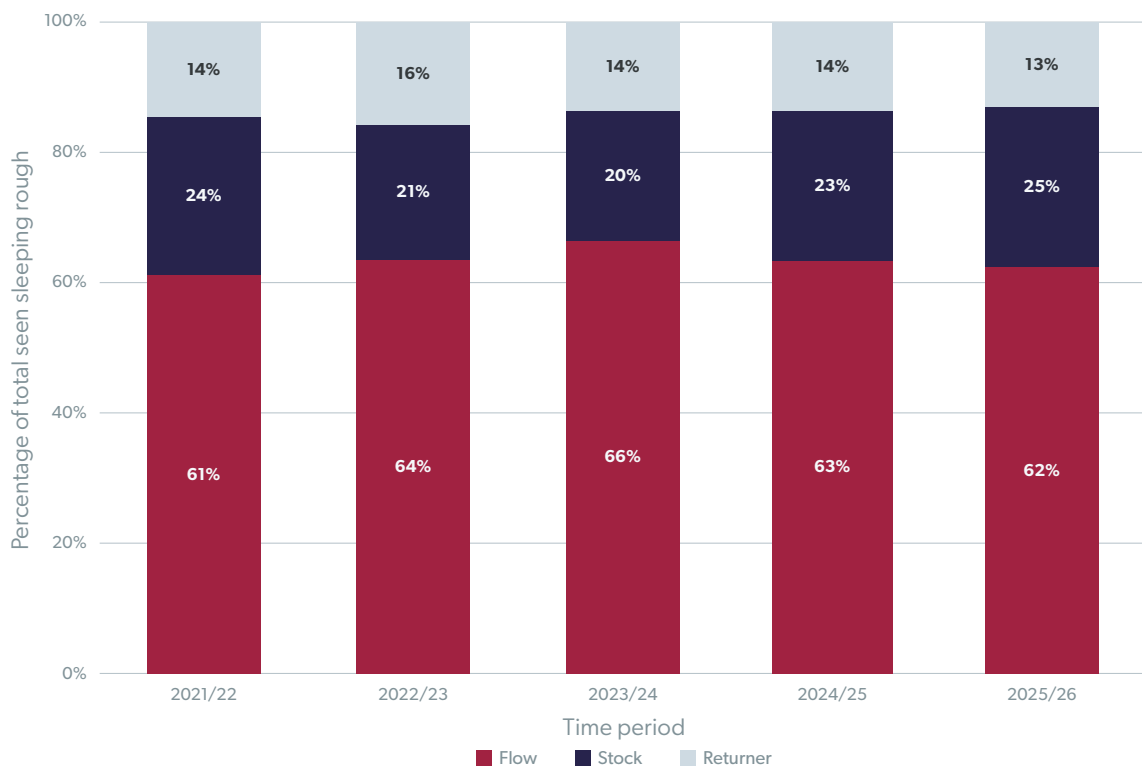
**Flow:** People who had never been seen sleeping rough prior to 2025/26 (new rough sleepers).

**Stock:** People who were also seen sleeping rough in 2024/25 (those seen across a minimum of two years).

**Returner:** People who were first seen sleeping rough prior to 2024/25 but were not seen sleeping rough during 2024/25 (those who have had a gap in their rough sleeping histories).

The number of people in the flow and returner category saw a decrease from 2024/25 to 2025/26 by 318 and 131 respectively, while the number of people in the stock category increased by 156. New rough sleepers (flow) made up over three fifths (62 per cent) of the total number of people seen sleeping rough in London in 2025/26. Longer term rough sleepers (stock), were the second largest group as a proportion of the total (25 per cent) and have increased since 2024/25 by two percentage points. 13 per cent of people seen sleeping rough were categorised as returners.

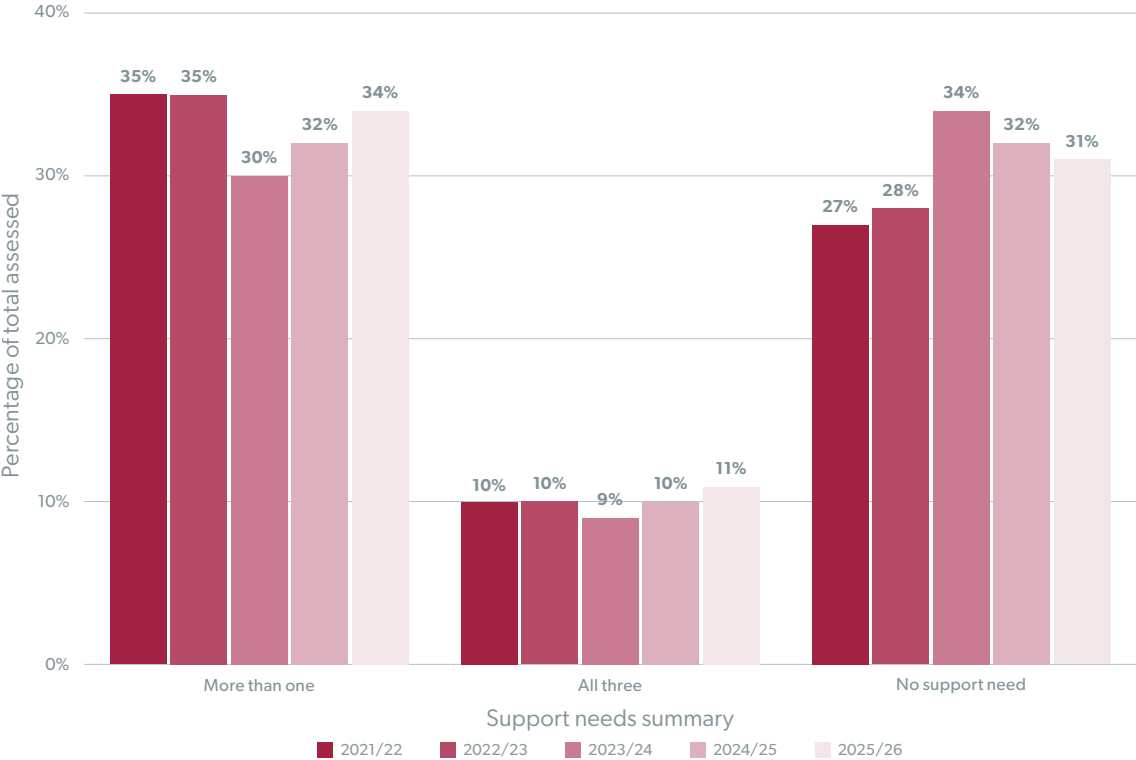
Figure 2: Categories of people seen sleeping rough in London



Source: CSJ analysis. GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

CHAIN data also provides information on the support needs of people seen sleeping rough in London, which includes alcohol, drugs, and mental health. In 2025/26, 34 per cent of rough sleepers in London had more than one of these support needs, while 11 per cent were identified as having all three. The proportion of those with no support needs has decreased from 32 per cent in 2024/25 to 31 per cent in 2025/26.

Figure 3: Support needs of people seen sleeping rough in London



Source: CSJ analysis. GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

These statistics highlight the prevalence of multiple and complex needs associated with rough sleeping. Long-term rough sleepers are more likely to have developed complex problems and often need tailored and intensive support to resolve their homelessness and sustain long-term housing.

CHAIN data also includes valuable insights on the institutional and accommodation history of people seen sleeping rough in London, including their accommodation outcomes. In 2025/26, 246 people had an armed forces history and slept rough, a fall of 45 compared to 2021/22, and 82 since 2024/25.<sup>19</sup> 667 individuals had spent time in the care system.<sup>20</sup> 2,442 people seen sleeping rough in 2025/26 had spent time in the prison estate, 27 per cent of all rough sleepers assessed in the year.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding accommodation history, the most common previous settled base was living with a friend, family member or partner (1,371).<sup>22</sup> The second was living in private rented accommodation (1,111).<sup>23</sup> The third was asylum support accommodation (1,037).<sup>24</sup> 336 people reported no settled base since arriving in the UK, meaning that these individuals likely entered the UK with no secure housing identified.<sup>25</sup>

There were 8,532 accommodation outcomes reported for people seen sleeping rough in 2025/26.<sup>26</sup> 42 per cent of people moved into short term hubs, shelters, and emergency accommodation.<sup>27</sup> 42 per cent of people moved into temporary accommodation.<sup>28</sup> 16 per cent moved into long-term accommodation.<sup>29</sup>

19 GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

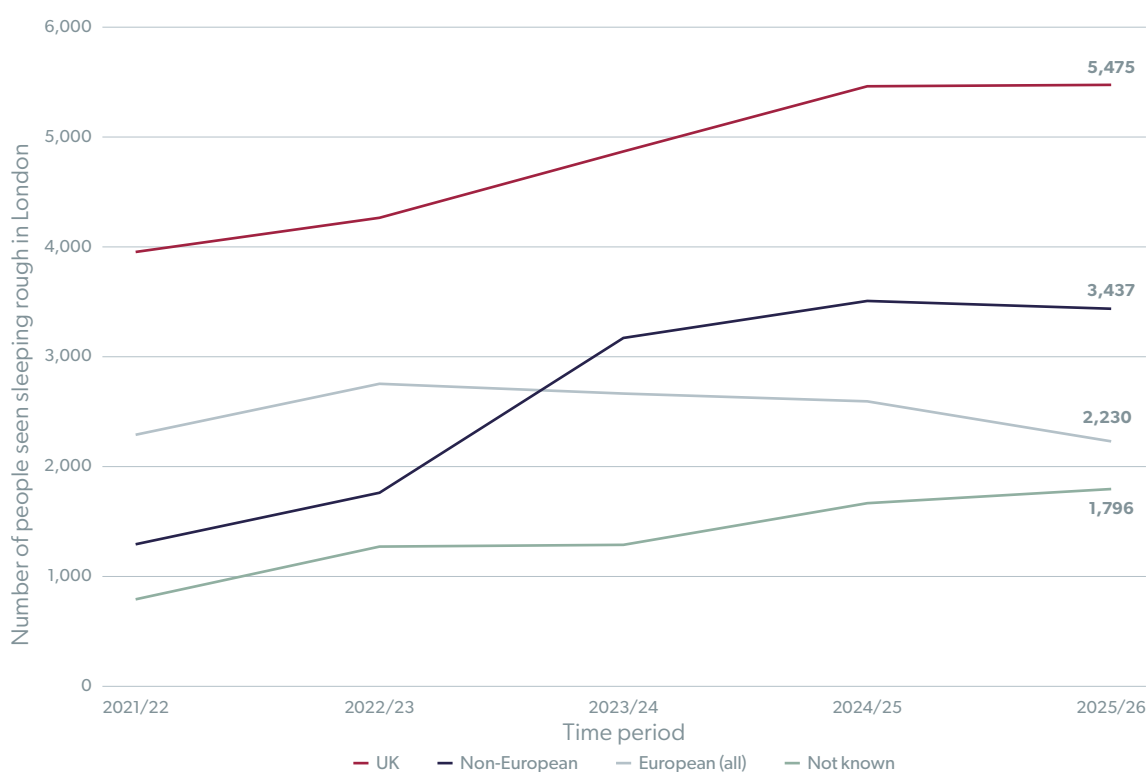
29 Ibid.

## 1.2 Demographics of people seen sleeping rough

### 1.2.1 Nationality and immigration status

5,667 people seen sleeping rough in London in 2025/26 were confirmed non-UK nationals. 5,475 were UK nationals, and 1,796 had unknown nationalities. People seen sleeping rough who were UK nationals and who had unknown nationalities increased in number from 2024/25 to 2025/26, while European (EEA, non-EEA, Europe not known) and non-European nationals decreased. The greatest percentage change was among those with European nationalities (-14 per cent).

Figure 4: Nationalities of people seen sleeping rough in London

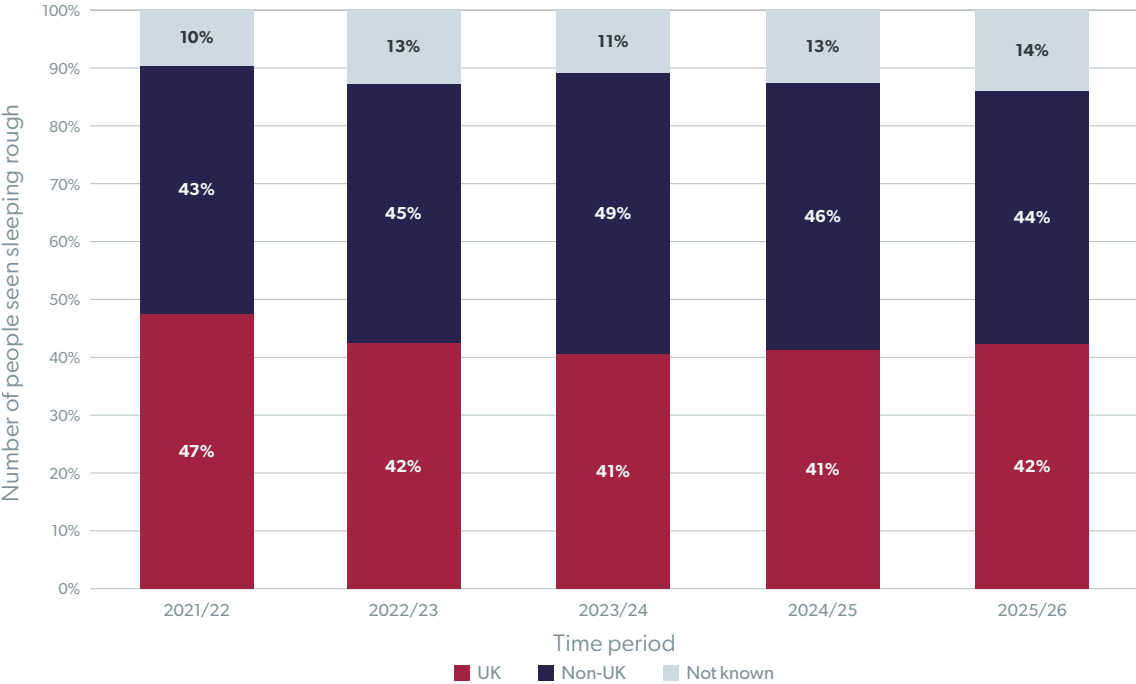


Source: GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

Including those with not-known nationalities in the base totals, non-UK nationals make up 44 per cent of people seen sleeping rough in London. 42 per cent of people seen sleeping rough were UK nationals, and 14 per cent held unknown nationalities. The GLA state that non-UK nationals tend to be more likely than UK nationals to be recorded as having an unknown nationality.<sup>30</sup>

30 GLA, Chain Annual Report: Greater London April 2025 – March 2026, June 2026, p. 36.

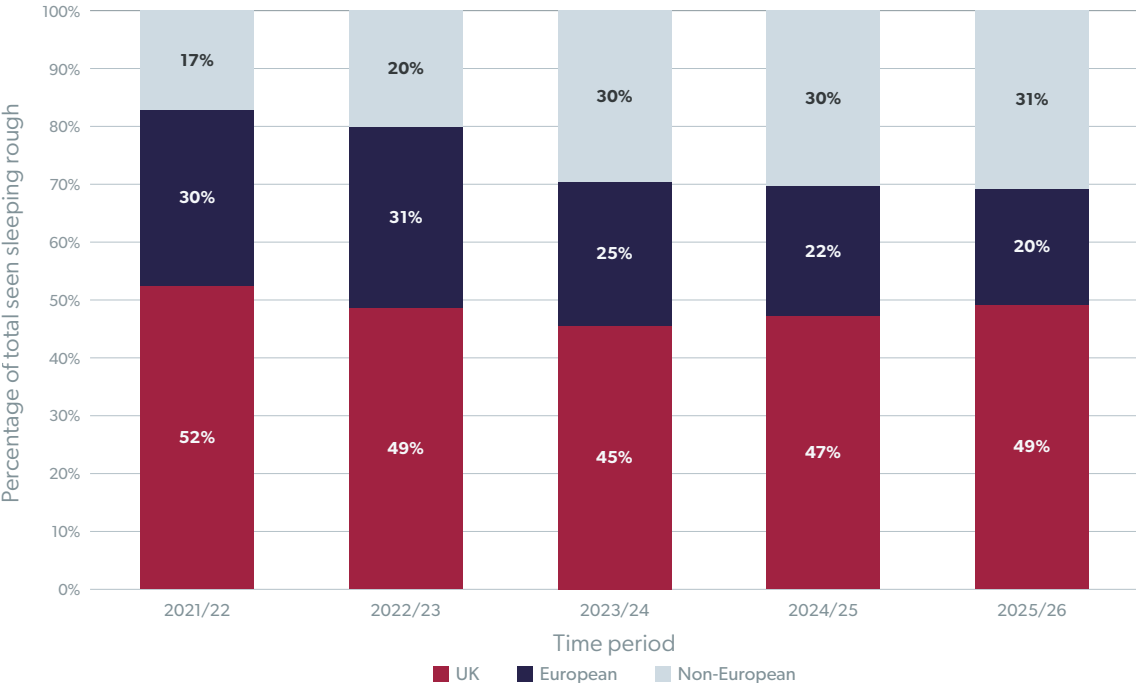
Figure 5: Proportion of UK, non-UK, and not known nationals sleeping rough as a percentage of total seen sleeping rough in London



Source: GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

Percentage of total seen sleeping rough in 2025/26 with confirmed nationalities, over half (51 per cent) were non-UK nationals. 20 per cent were European, 31 per cent were non-European, and 49 per cent were UK nationals.

Figure 6: Proportion of UK, European, and Non-European nationals sleeping rough as a percentage of total seen sleeping rough with confirmed nationalities



Source: GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

The number of non-European nationals seen sleeping rough has increased by more than any other nationality category in recent years, increasing by 166 per cent from 2021/22 to 2025/26, despite a two per cent fall in the last year. In this same period, there has been a 127 per cent increase in the number of individuals sleeping rough with unknown nationalities, and a three per cent decline in the number of European nationals sleeping rough.<sup>31</sup>

The most common nationality held (other than British) among those seen sleeping rough in London in 2025/26 was Romanian, followed by Eritrean and Polish. The top ten non-British nationalities among rough sleepers in London can be seen below in Table 2.

Table 2: Most prevalent nationalities of people seen sleeping rough in London

Countries of Origin	Number
Romania	719
Eritrea	713
Poland	438
India	386
Sudan	378
Afghanistan	186
Nigeria	162
Iran	151
Lithuania	136
Portugal	124

Source: GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

## 1.2.2 Age and sex

11,647 people seen sleeping rough in London in 2025/26 were aged 26 or over, making up the majority of rough sleepers (90 per cent).<sup>32</sup> 1,291 people seen sleeping rough were under the age of 26, while 13 children (under 18s) were seen sleeping rough.<sup>33</sup>

The majority of people seen sleeping rough in 2025/26 were men, representing 80 per cent of the total, and 10,355 in number.<sup>34</sup> 2,251 women were seen sleeping rough, 17 per cent of the total, while 319 had an unknown sex.<sup>35</sup> 13 people seen sleeping rough said they were non-binary.<sup>36</sup>

The number of women sleeping rough has risen for the fourth consecutive year, an increase of 102 since 2024/25, despite an overall decrease. The number of men sleeping rough fell by 414 in the last year.

31 GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

# The government's plan to end homelessness

In December 2025, the government published its homelessness strategy, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, the first ever cross-government strategy to address homelessness in all its forms.<sup>37</sup> The strategy marked a pivot towards prevention, while also containing a headline commitment to halve long-term rough sleeping. This is the government's key target regarding rough sleeping and will be measured by the number of people sleeping rough over the month long-term.<sup>38</sup>

The homelessness strategy is structured under five pillars:

**Pillar one: universal prevention** - tackling the root causes of homelessness such as poverty, low income, and lack of affordable housing across the whole population.

**Pillar two: targeted prevention** – providing tailored support to groups at higher risk (for example prison leavers, care leavers, hospital discharges, and survivors of domestic abuse).

**Pillar three: preventing crisis** – intervening early when people are at risk of losing their home, to help them stay where they are, or move straight into suitable settled housing.

**Pillar four: improving emergency responses** – improving the safety, quality, and use of temporary accommodation, and how people are supported when they do become homeless.

**Pillar five: recovery and preventing repeat homelessness** – supporting people to recover, address complex needs and sustain long-term housing, so homelessness does not happen more than once, and long-term rough sleeping is halved.

In 2025, the Mayor of London launched the capital's *Rough Sleeping Plan of Action*, which laid out his plan to end rough sleeping in London by 2030.<sup>39</sup> This includes a commitment to scaling up Ending Homelessness Hubs, where people at risk of rough sleeping can be provided with 24/7 support before they spend a night on the street.<sup>40</sup> The strategy also promises to deliver a Homes off the Streets programme to provide long-term housing options.

Both nationally, and in London, the emphasis on preventing homelessness and rough sleeping is welcome. In particular, the homelessness strategy's recognition of the importance of tackling the holistic and root causes of homelessness, which include family breakdown, worklessness, educational failure, addiction, and problem debt, in addition to housing insecurity.

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<sup>37</sup> MHCLG, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, December 2025.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Mayor of London, *The Mayor's Rough Sleeping Plan of Action 2025*, May 2025.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Despite a welcome pivot to prevention, the government's pledge to halve the number of long-term rough sleepers by the end of this Parliament is underpowered; and there is little explanation of how the government will meet its long-term ambition to end rough sleeping entirely.

In London, while the Mayor has made a welcome commitment to provide stable long-term housing options for people exiting rough sleeping, the Homes off the Streets programme is not due to launch until 2027,<sup>41</sup> and meets just a third of total demand for high-support housing services in the capital.<sup>42</sup>

Without meaningfully and visibly reducing rough sleeping in both England and London, the government's and Mayor of London's homelessness strategies will be judged as having failed. To ensure success, the government should commit to scaling up the most proven and evidenced intervention to end homelessness for those with multiple and complex problems: Housing First.

The government's acknowledgement of Housing First's effectiveness is not enough to secure its long-term future. A lack of ambition to see Housing First scaled up risks the future of vital services and leaves many without the housing security and long-term support needed to recover from entrenched rough sleeping.

## 2.1 Housing First

Housing First provides ordinary settled housing alongside intensive, person-centred support for people whose homelessness is compounded by multiple and complex support needs. Housing First is different from conventional interventions as it offers permanent housing from the start, dependent on an individual's willingness to maintain a tenancy. Housing is sustained by intensive support, with staff having low caseloads of four to six service users, rather than between the usual 20-40.

In July 2025, the CSJ published *No Place Like Home*, a blueprint for scaling up Housing First in England to provide 5,571 places by the end of the Parliament.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on evidence from city-region pilots in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, and the West Midlands, the research found impressive outcomes from English services, with 84 per cent of service users retaining their tenancies after three years.<sup>44</sup>

Housing First is also good value for money, offering the government a two-pound return on investment for every pound spent.<sup>45</sup> This includes financial savings to public services and enhanced personal wellbeing. Housing First delivers significant savings for homelessness services, the NHS, criminal justice, and the police.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the success of Housing First at ending homelessness for the majority of its service user cohort, England has been slower to develop Housing First than other European countries.<sup>47</sup> The homelessness strategy, while supporting the model in principle, abdicates responsibility for national stewardship. In countries where Housing First has been scaled up successfully, central governments have taken responsibility for providing a degree of national stewardship and setting clear expectations for local areas.

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41 London Assembly, Homes off the Streets Programme, December 2025. Accessed: <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/homes-streets-programme>.

42 CSJ analysis of Housing First need in London (1,534) and the Mayor of London's plan to provide 500 homes for rough sleepers through the Homes off the Streets programme.

43 CSJ, *No Place Like Home: Scaling up Housing First in England*, July 2025, p. 52.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

45 MHCLG, *Housing First Pilots: Cost Benefit Analysis – Final Report*, October 2024, p. 45.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

47 MHCLG, *Tenancy sustainment and complex needs: A rapid evidence assessment*, December 2025.

Without a commitment from central government to support localities to run Housing First services, there is a risk that services will start to decline from their already small starting point. A survey of homeless accommodation providers in 2025 found that just one in five (20 per cent) offered a Housing First service.<sup>48</sup>

The homelessness strategy's lack of commitment to scaling up Housing First comes despite government research, published on the same day as the homelessness strategy, highlighting that the evidence on Housing First "is growing, and existing evidence clearly demonstrates impressively high housing retention outcomes", alongside the "pressing need for further testing in the UK context to add more weight to the evidence base".<sup>49</sup>

The Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness have said that by not rolling out Housing First nationally, the strategy risks being an "exercise in managing homelessness rather than ending it."<sup>50</sup>

In the next chapter we set out our plan for reform, which would double Housing First provision in England, marking the first stage of a national rollout, and fulfilling the need for further testing in the UK context. Our plan for reform also addresses the surge in non-UK national rough sleeping and ensures the government's focus on prevention adequately tackles the root causes of rough sleeping.

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48 Homeless Link, Support to End Homelessness 2025, June 2026, p. 47.

49 MHCLG, Tenancy sustainment and complex needs: A rapid evidence assessment, December 2025.

50 Crisis, Co-Chairs Respond to National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025. Accessed: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/appg-for-ending-homelessness/appg-bulletins/response-to-national-plan-to-end-homelessness/>.

# The CSJ's plan for reform

The CSJ has a plan to reverse the increase in rough sleeping and restore control, order, and hope to Britain's and London's streets. This plan draws upon our blueprint for how to scale-up Housing First in England, *No Place Like Home*, developed in partnership with frontline charities and leading Housing First services in Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region.

## 3.1 Scale-up Housing First to halve long-term rough sleeping

Halving, and then ending, long-term rough sleeping requires the scaling up of interventions that are proven to end homelessness. *A National Plan to End Homelessness* contains ambitious commitments to put Britain back on track to ending rough sleeping, but its ambitions risk being unmet without a commitment to scaling up Housing First in England.

As noted above, only a minority of homeless accommodation projects offer Housing First, and the absence of a commitment to scale-up the service risks the erasure of gains won in recent years through the national pilots. The CSJ recommends that the government commit to doubling Housing First places within the implementation of the homelessness strategy. This could operate as a ringfence within the new Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse Grant (HRSDAG), ensuring that a locally designed Housing First service is available in every locality in receipt of funding, in the same way that funding is now ringfenced for prevention.<sup>51</sup>

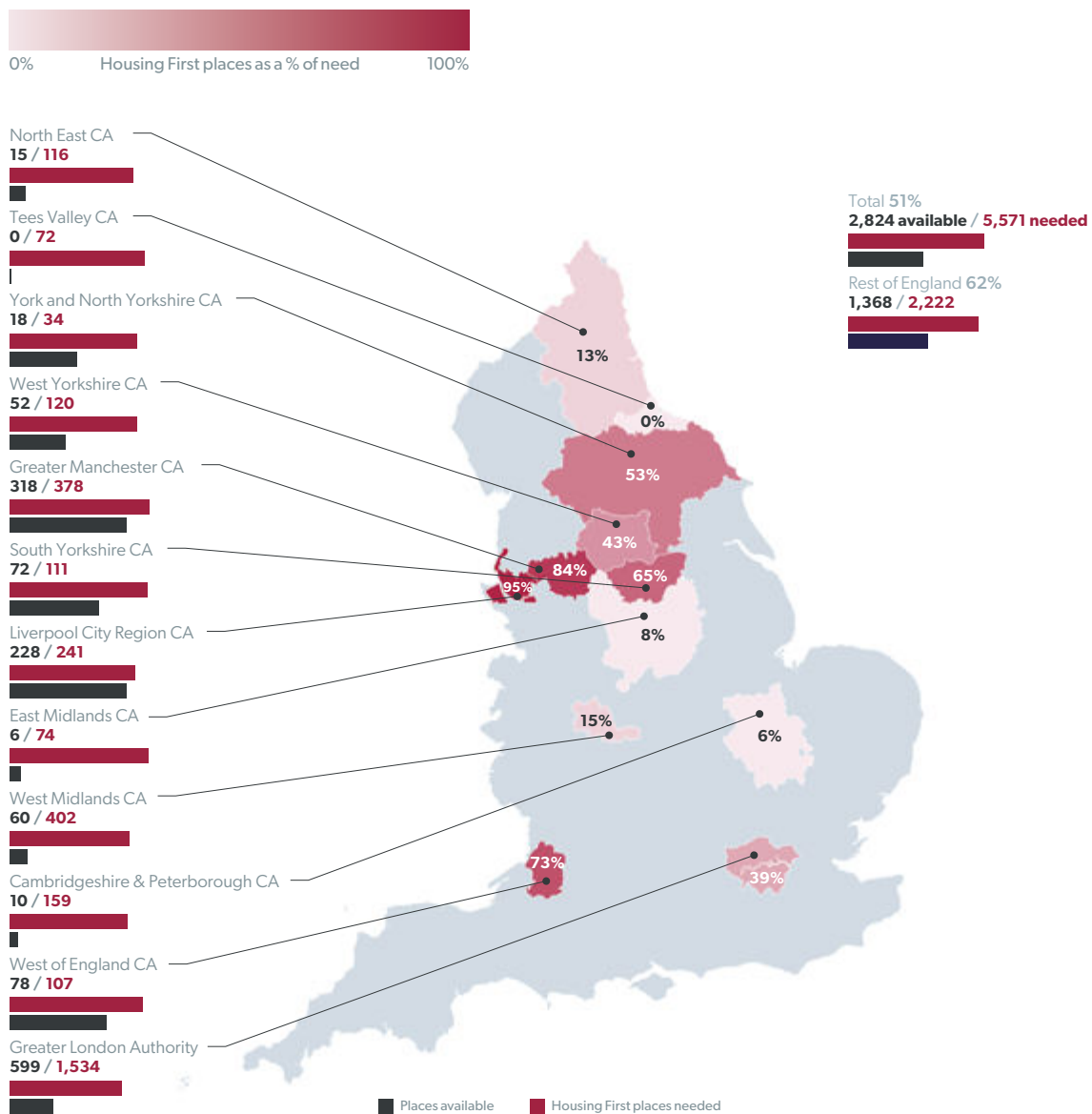
In *No Place Like Home*, the CSJ estimated that there were 2,824 Housing First places available across England, with 37 per cent of localities running or commissioning a Housing First service.<sup>52</sup> Our analysis estimates that approximately 5,571 places are needed across England to replicate the scale of the pilot services in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, and the West Midlands, a doubling of existing capacity. This includes 1,534 places in London.

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51 MHCLG, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, December 2025, p. 49.

52 CSJ, *No Place Like Home: Scaling up Housing First in England*, July 2025, p. 52.

Figure 7: Regional distribution of need and places for Housing First



Source: CSJ, No Place Like Home: Scaling up Housing First in England, July 2025, p. 51.

Over four years, we predict that a national Housing First programme would cost £103 million (£131 million including housing benefit), as shown below in Table 3. By 2030/31, this would cost £39.2 million per year in revenue funding, assuming all existing Housing First services were rolled into the ringfenced fund. Our full methodology for estimating the number of Housing First places required over time and corresponding costs can be found in *No Place Like Home*.<sup>53</sup>

53 Ibid, p. 52.

Table 3: Scaling up Housing First over four years

Region	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	2030/31
Greater Manchester	378	378	378	378
Liverpool City Region	241	241	241	241
West Midlands	402	402	402	402
York and North Yorkshire	1	14	30	34
West Yorkshire	3	49	107	120
South Yorkshire	3	46	98	111
Tees Valley	2	30	64	72
North East	3	48	103	116
East Midlands	2	30	65	74
Cambridge & Peterborough	4	66	141	159
West of England	2	44	95	107
Greater London Authority	35	631	1,360	1,534
Rest of England	51	914	1,970	2,222
<b>Total number of places</b>	<b>1,125</b>	<b>2,893</b>	<b>5,054</b>	<b>5,571</b>
<b>Cost per year</b>	<b>£7,916,291</b>	<b>£20,355,268</b>	<b>£35,558,478</b>	<b>£39,199,698</b>

Source: CSJ analysis of MHCLG, Evaluation of the Housing First Pilots: Cost Benefit Analysis – Final Report, October 2024.

The government could fund an expansion of Housing First within existing homelessness expenditure. However, to raise additional funds, we propose scaling back the Places for Growth programme, including scrapping relocation expenses for civil servants.

The Places for Growth programme was set up to relocate government jobs, allowing departments to provide up to £14,000 per London-based civil servant for relocation expenses.<sup>54</sup> Spending on these expenses alone is estimated to cost the taxpayer £10.4 million from 2026 to 2030. Recruitment, training, and programme costs alone within the programme are estimated to cost £171 million over the same period.<sup>55</sup>

By redirecting relocation expenses for civil servants, and a 20 per cent reduction in recruitment, training, and programme costs, the government could release up to £44.6 million to scale-up Housing First.<sup>56</sup> Given the extraordinary rise in rough sleeping, we believe the government’s priority should be to invest in Housing First, rather than the Places for Growth programme.

54 The Cabinet Office, Places for Growth Formative Evaluation Report, October 2024.

55 Ibid.

56 CSJ, No Place Like Home: Scaling up Housing First in England, July 2025, p. 57.

## RECOMMENDATION

MHCLG should establish a cross-government, national Housing First programme, consisting of a £103 million four-year ringfenced fund, delivered annually as part of the HRSDAG. This would deliver 5,571 Housing First places by 2030/31 for people whose homelessness is compounded by multiple and complex challenges, and who have not been able to access permanent housing through conventional pathways.

A national Housing First programme should:

- a. Support the commissioning of multi-agency Housing First services within local and combined authorities.
- b. Be backed by an outcomes monitoring framework reflecting the objectives of all contributing departments.

The government should hold primary responsibility for developing a national implementation and evaluation plan for Housing First in England, alongside a shared approach to monitoring outcomes and fidelity. This should be led by a Housing First programme director within MHCLG. The programme director should be supported by a cross-government steering group, managed by senior civil servants from all relevant departments. Oversight of a national Housing First programme should also include representation from local government and the homelessness and affordable housing sector.

A Housing First programme should be supported by a robust monitoring framework which embeds a shared understanding and vision for Housing First in England. This should continue the commitment made during the national pilots to high-fidelity Housing First.

Eligibility for a Housing First place should be determined by a UK and local connection test. To be eligible for Housing First, the test would require that a person shows one of the following:

- a. Is a British citizen, Irish citizen, Commonwealth citizen with a right of abode, or EEA or Swiss citizen with equal treatment rights.
- b. Has recourse to public funds and been lawfully resident (including rough sleeping or living in temporary accommodation) in the UK for a continuous period of ten years and arrived in the UK on a safe and legal resettlement or relocation scheme and have had a connection with a local or regional area for at least two years, including being, or in the past, resident (including rough sleeping or temporary accommodation) there, employed there, have family associations, or because of special circumstances.

Those who do not meet the UK or local connection test should still be supported through other services but would not be prioritised for Housing First. Members and veterans of the UK armed forces should be exempt from the test.

## 3.2 Enforce immigration law to restore control

The increase in non-UK national rough sleeping has constituted one of the most significant changes to the demographics of those sleeping rough in England. Without addressing the growing number of non-UK nationals sleeping rough, the government will be unable to meet its long-term ambition to end rough sleeping, and risks contributing to public frustration over a lack of control over immigration and asylum.

While many of the drivers of rough sleeping are the same for UK and non-UK nationals, and a foreign national may have lived in the UK for years before sleeping rough, there are systemic problems within the UK's immigration and asylum system that exacerbate this problem, and have led to a growing number of new arrivals to the UK, often asylum seekers, sleeping rough. This is particularly the case in London, where 1,037 new rough sleepers' last settled base in the UK was asylum support accommodation.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, many non-UK nationals sleeping rough do not have access to public funds. This is known as having restricted or no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Nearly half (48 per cent) of all non-UK national rough sleepers seen across England in March 2026 had restricted or unknown access to public funds.<sup>58</sup> As a result of this, supporting non-UK nationals through conventional services is challenging and many individuals remain trapped, cycling between emergency rough sleeping shelters and the street.

By definition, a migrant with NRPF who is sleeping rough has been unable to sustain or accommodate themselves without public assistance. This exposes a failure of UK immigration policy, running counter to the Home Office's expectation that migrants who come to the UK should be able to maintain and support themselves without public assistance.<sup>59</sup> In this respect, the immigration system is not achieving the very outcomes it is designed to prioritise.

### 3.2.1 The government's approach to migrant rough sleeping

The homelessness strategy's approach to migrant rough sleeping echoes the overall emphasis on prevention. This includes a headline commitment from the Home Office to share information about refugees at risk of homelessness in advance of a discontinuation of support notification, a "homeless migrants capability training package for councils and voluntary sector organisations" and "a pilot in four council areas on access to immigration advice, short term accommodation and a named point of contact within the Home Office."<sup>60</sup>

Beyond prevention, there is reference to supporting "trusted and willing civil society organisations" to work with the Voluntary Returns Service, the Home Office's central support mechanism to help migrants return to their home countries.<sup>61</sup>

Better collaboration between the Home Office and local authorities is essential to prevent unnecessary rough sleeping and homelessness, and it is right that government extends support to those entitled to it. Too often, one arm of government has attempted to end homelessness, while another inadvertently caused it. The release of refugees and asylum seekers from Home Office accommodation, without having secured accommodation on exit, is one example of this.

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57 GLA, CHAIN Annual Data Tables 2025/26, June 2026.

58 CSJ analysis. MHCLG, Rough sleeping data framework March 2026, May 2026.

59 Home Office, Suitability: Grounds for refusal/cancellation – Rough sleeping in the UK (version 3.0), November 2025, p. 14.

60 MHCLG, A National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025, pp. 45-46.

61 Ibid, p. 46.

However, the homelessness strategy falls short of the comprehensive package of reforms needed to restore control over non-UK national rough sleeping. While pilots and new duties to collaborate are welcome, they fall far short of the sustained and large-scale action required to address a challenge of this magnitude on the country's streets.

Without further action, the government risks further entrenching rough sleeping among non-UK nationals. Furthermore, as Crisis recognised in 2025, funding will continue to be required for temporary responses to non-UK nationals sleeping rough, particularly those with limited or no recourse to public funds.<sup>62</sup> There is also a political risk for the government, as inaction threatens to fuel public anger over visible rough sleeping in local communities, while simultaneously signalling a failure to maintain effective control of the immigration system.

To solve this problem, some have called for an extension of statutory support to a greater number of non-UK nationals sleeping rough, and reforms to, or even the abolition, of NRPF status.<sup>63</sup> We believe this would be the wrong approach for the government to take. Leaving aside the financial cost of such a policy, or the ability of statutory services to respond, this approach would be in direct conflict with the government's policy to restore order and control to the UK's immigration system and, at worst, provide a significant pull factor to migrants and asylum seekers to enter the UK, contributing to further pressure on the homelessness system.

Instead, to restore control, the government must be willing to enforce immigration law, to ensure that those with no permission to stay in the UK are removed, either voluntarily or by an enforced return. A lack of effective immigration enforcement has created the conditions for non-UK national rough sleeping to proliferate, both by creating strong pull factors, and by undermining the government's ability to remove those with no permission to remain. GLA analysis shows that 946 people were seen sleeping rough in 2025/26 with no valid leave or who were undocumented, while a further 798 had no clear status.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, just half of refused asylum seekers who applied for asylum between 2010 and 2022 had been returned by December 2025.<sup>65</sup> Combined with generous access to welfare and social housing if granted refugee status, the UK is an attractive destination for many. This puts further strain on a system that is increasingly unable to cope, resulting in destitution and homelessness for some.

While failings within the wider immigration and asylum system create pull factors, it remains unclear whether, and in what circumstances, the specific powers to refuse or cancel permission on the grounds of rough sleeping have been used in practice.

A lack of enforcement is in large part due to the UK's legal framework, which places substantive barriers in the way of applying immigration law. For example, prior to the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the government was found to have acted unlawfully in removing EU nationals on the basis of rough sleeping, on the grounds that this breached EU freedom of movement. This was reported by the BBC, which noted that the Home Office stated it had ceased all enforcement action against EEA nationals for rough sleeping.<sup>66</sup>

Post-Brexit, the government's new immigration system contained grounds whereby a non-UK national rough sleeper could be removed from the country. Paragraphs SUI 27.1 and SUI 27.2 of *Part Suitability of*

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62 Crisis, *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2025*, November 2025, p. 76.

63 Centre for Social Policy, *No reason for no recourse: Why reform of 'No Recourse to Public Funds' conditions would be good for London and the UK*, November 2024.

64 GLA, *Chain Annual Report: Greater London April 2025 – March 2026*, June 2026, p. 36.

65 The Migration Observatory, *Deportation and returns of unauthorised migrants from the UK*, March 2026. Accessed: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/returns-of-unauthorised-migrants-from-the-uk/>.

66 BBC News, *EU rough sleepers win damages for illegal deportations*, May 2018. Accessed: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44093868>.

*the Immigration Rules* set out a basis for refusing a permission to stay on the grounds of rough sleeping. In 2021, these rules were significantly narrowed, and guidance issued by the Home Office in November 2025, states that a non-UK national can only be removed after repeated refusal of support, and engagement in persistent anti-social behaviour.<sup>67</sup>

In February 2026, Bob Blackman MP asked the government how many non-UK nationals had been removed via the route above. The government refused to answer, stating that the information could only be collected and verified at disproportionate cost.<sup>68</sup> This raises serious questions about the monitoring of such returns within the Home Office, or if this is even happening at all.

Experts also told us that incentives within the immigration system once an individual is in the UK can entrench rough sleeping. For some rough sleepers with irregular immigration status, their only hope for regularising their status in the UK is to prove continuous residence after they have been in the UK for 20 years. After demonstrating 20 years residence, an individual is able to apply for leave to remain for 2.5 years and begin the 10-year route to settlement. This policy can lead to individuals choosing to sleep rough for many years without access to support, resulting in entrenched complex needs and disadvantage. For many of these individuals, a supported return to their country of origin would be better for their recovery, but the 'hope' of regularising their immigration status after 20 years is too great a pull factor, despite the scale of disadvantage and poverty they may experience during the wait.

Below, we outline the principles of a new approach, which while extending support to non-UK nationals rough sleeping, upholds the integrity of the UK border and immigration system, and protects the homelessness system from overwhelming levels of need.

### 3.2.2 Restoring control: The principles of a new approach to tackling non-UK national rough sleeping

To restore control, the government must be willing to enforce immigration law, as well as meet its legal obligations to non-UK nationals who are eligible for support and accommodation. We believe that such an approach is most conducive to the common good of UK society and the interests of the British taxpayer, while also adopting a right humanitarian concern for non-UK nationals who are sleeping rough. Enforcing the law will ensure the system can respond and administer support in the most effective way possible.

There are three principles that we recommend government adopts in its response to non-UK national rough sleeping.

1. Non-UK nationals sleeping rough should be able to access emergency support and accommodation, alongside an expectation that their immigration status will be resolved.
2. Those who have had their asylum claim rejected, have overstayed their visa, or who are in the UK unlawfully should be required to return to their country of origin.
3. In doing the above, the government should adopt an explicit presumption in favour of voluntary return in its policy toward non-UK nationals sleeping rough.

To implement this approach, MHCLG and the Home Office should create a Migrant Rough Sleeping Unit (MRSU) to coordinate activity across government and to support strategic and local authorities in administering support to non-UK nationals sleeping rough.

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67 Home Office, *Suitability: Grounds for refusal/cancellation – Rough sleeping in the UK* (version 3.0), November 2025, p. 4.

68 House of Commons, Written Question 110752, answered on 13th February 2026. Accessed: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2026-02-04/110752#>.

### 3.2.3 Extending support to non-UK nationals sleeping rough

The government should ensure that non-UK nationals sleeping rough are able to resolve their immigration status, to determine both their permission to stay in the UK, and options for support. This is a crucial first step in helping people to move from homelessness to long-term recovery and housing. Otherwise, individuals will continue to find themselves trapped between the street and a mixture of temporary support and accommodation.

The Homelessness Escalations Service (HES) exists within the Home Office to identify non-UK nationals sleeping rough who qualify for public funding. It helps to quickly prove the immigration status of rough sleepers, ensuring services are able to distinguish between those eligible to receive support, and those who are not.<sup>69</sup> The HES was identified as a positive programme in a recent systems-wide evaluation of homelessness and rough sleeping.<sup>70</sup> We recommend that this becomes the first point of contact for all homelessness services when they identify a non-UK national sleeping rough. HES should be reformulated as a triage service to help present an individual with a range of options relevant to their case.

The use of HES by local authorities and frontline homelessness organisations is currently voluntary, and interaction between homelessness services and the Home Office has been marred by difficulty and controversy in recent years. Previously, the Mayor of London has refused to collaborate with the Home Office regarding information sharing about non-UK national rough sleepers.<sup>71</sup>

We recommend that use of the HES is embedded across all local authority and frontline responses to rough sleeping. As the HES is part of the Home Office, this will require mandatory engagement and collaboration from the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority, local and strategic authorities, and homelessness organisations.

To mandate engagement with the Home Office, the government should create a new statutory duty on local authorities and frontline homelessness services to work with and share information with the Home Office in all cases of non-UK national rough sleeping. When a non-UK national sleeping rough is identified, services should be legally required to refer their case to the Home Office to obtain a clarification of immigration status.

Obtaining a clarification of immigration status will enable service providers to provide individuals with the most appropriate options for support. For those with permission to remain, this should include housing options, but also support with looking for work, accessing benefits, referrals to services for alcohol, substance misuse or mental health issues, the National Referral Mechanism for potential victims of modern slavery, as well as access to reconnection services.

It is important to state that every person sleeping rough, regardless of nationality or status, should be able to access immediate safe accommodation and basic support prior to having their immigration status checked via the HES. Immigration status checks should be used to unlock further support and routes home, not to deny emergency assistance.

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69 Home Office, User agreement: Homelessness Escalations Service, December 2024. Accessed: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homelessness-escalations-service-hes/user-agreement-homelessness-escalations-service-accessible>.

70 MHCLG, Systems-wide evaluation of homelessness and rough sleeping: preliminary findings, February 2025.

71 Inside Housing, London and Greater Manchester vow not to co-operate with plan to deport rough sleepers, December 2020. Accessed: <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/london-and-greater-manchester-vow-not-to-co-operate-with-plan-to-deport-rough-sleepers-68984>.

### 3.2.4 Enforcing immigration law

To restore control, the government must enforce immigration law, so that those with no permission to remain in the UK, including people sleeping rough, are swiftly removed.

A fundamental principle of a functioning immigration and asylum system is that when an individual is residing illegally, they will be removed. The government has recognised this point in *Restoring Order and Control*: “Once a failed asylum seeker has had their claim rejected, the public reasonably expect they will be removed from the country”.<sup>72</sup> As shown above, and as recognised by the government, current practice falls far short of this ambition. Enforcing immigration law to restore control over non-UK national rough sleeping is therefore dependent on the success of the government’s broader reforms to the immigration and asylum system.

Within the Home Office’s reforms, the government should consider abolishing the 20-year long residence rule which creates a perverse incentive for non-UK nationals with no recourse to public funds to sleep rough, in the hope of one day reaching the 20-year threshold. This can lead to entrenched rough sleeping, the development of complex needs like addiction and mental illness, and a life of extreme poverty. We consider the perverse incentive the rule creates to be more harmful than the loss of the pathway to residence. However, any removal must be accompanied by investment in support for individuals to make a dignified voluntary return to their country of origin.

In addition, those who have had their asylum claim rejected, have overstayed their visa, or who are in the UK unlawfully should be required to return to their country of origin. This approach is not only fair to taxpayers and essential to maintaining trust in the immigration and asylum system, but also vital to sustaining public support for efforts to end rough sleeping and homelessness. It is also critical to prevent entrenched rough sleeping, as those with no permission to remain in the UK most likely have no recourse to public funds or accommodation.

To achieve this, the Home Office should strengthen the HES to hold a clear paper trail on individual cases. For example, when the HES finds that an individual has no permission to remain in the UK, the Home Office should issue that person, alongside any support services working with them, a clear resolution plan for their case (for example, appeals routes and options for voluntary return). This approach supports the government’s ambition to accelerate removals, while also ensuring that those who have a lawful right to be in the UK can regularise their status and access support.

The government should strengthen the relationship between local authorities, frontline homelessness services and the Voluntary Returns Service. While the strategy states that the Voluntary Returns Service will work in partnership with “willing civil society organisations” collaboration should be strengthened and made a legal obligation, with an expectation set that by the end of the Parliament every local authority and frontline homelessness organisation has a working relationship and dedicated point of contact within the Voluntary Returns Service.

Where an individual with no permission to remain refuses a voluntary return, they should be subject to an enforced return or deportation. The government is right to emphasise the importance of legal reform to making this policy a success.

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<sup>72</sup> Home Office, *Restoring Order and control*, November 2025, p. 18.

### 3.2.5 Setting a preferential option for voluntary return

In doing the above, the government should set a preferential option for voluntary return, both in how it responds to non-UK nationals sleeping rough who have permission to remain in the UK, and those who do not. This would mean that a goal of government policy regarding non-UK national rough sleeping would be to support individuals to make a voluntary return to their home country.

Voluntary returns are an established part of England's response to rough sleeping. Access to a voluntary return is mentioned in the homelessness strategy as one response to non-UK national rough sleeping,<sup>73</sup> and the Voluntary Returns Service lists those sleeping rough as being eligible for up to £3,000 in financial support after a person leaves the UK.<sup>74</sup>

The interaction between the Voluntary Returns Service and frontline homelessness support services should be strengthened. While not mandated for those with permission to remain in the UK, we recommend that every non-UK national sleeping rough is given the option of a voluntary return to their country of origin, working in partnership with the third sector and support services in the UK and abroad.

Increasing the number of voluntary returns would save the taxpayer money and relieve pressure on the homelessness system. It is also right that, in principle, a person's home country takes primary responsibility for alleviating their homelessness and addressing their needs, rather than the British taxpayer.

The government's data estimates that the annual cost per rough sleeper to public services equates to £14,204.<sup>75</sup> This does not include the cost of subsidised housing, or support provided after a person is housed. By this metric, a voluntary return where an individual is supported with up to £3,000 to rehabilitate in their home country offers significant value for money in comparison to them remaining in the UK.

Despite the individual and fiscal benefits of voluntary return, this pathway is only open to those without leave to remain. While this includes many non-UK nationals sleeping rough (as noted, nearly half of non-UK nationals sleeping rough in England have limited or no recourse to public funds, which will include those in the UK illegally), it is not comprehensive, and excludes a substantial number of non-UK nationals who have permission to remain in the UK but have slept rough.

To enable a preference for voluntary return, we recommend that the government extends access to the Voluntary Returns Service to any non-UK national who has slept rough in the preceding 12 months of an application. Access to financial support should be regardless of immigration status and contingent on verification by an official outreach team.

Extending the opportunity of making a voluntary return is often in the best interests of an individual sleeping rough. Several charities and frontline homelessness organisations in the UK work in this area to help facilitate a return to a person's country of origin. One of these is the charity Barka.

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73 MHCLG, A National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025, p. 46

74 Gov.UK, Get help to return home if you're a migrant in the UK: Who can get help, n.d. Accessed: <https://www.gov.uk/return-home-voluntarily/who>.

75 MHCLG, Rough sleeping questionnaire 2025: Headline findings, November 2025.

## Case study: Barka

Barka UK's Voluntary Reconnections project offers assisted return for Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants who are sleeping rough. The aim is not simply to 'send people back', but to provide a humane reconnection and reintegration route for those who cannot or do not want to remain in the UK, so they are supported into stable accommodation, treatment, or work on return rather than cycling back into homelessness. Since 2007, Barka UK reports that it has helped more than 5,000 CEE migrants to return voluntarily to their countries of origin, while also working with UK public services and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to secure any support or benefits to which people are entitled before they leave.<sup>76</sup>

A distinctive feature of Barka's model is who delivers it. Outreach teams are made up of people who speak migrants' languages, understand their cultures and, crucially, often have firsthand experience of life on the streets and of their own reconnection journeys. Barka attributes much of its success to employing ex-service users and to its close links with a network of homelessness and rehabilitation services across European countries. This means that, when someone agrees to return, they are not simply put on a plane, but they can be met at the other end and supported into rehabilitation and stable housing, with the explicit aim of preventing a return to rough sleeping or to the UK.

Local authorities have commissioned Barka to run specialist support for migrant rough sleepers in parts of the UK, including Westminster.<sup>77</sup> However, there is no nationally funded network. In Westminster, Barka workers engaged people in their own language to understand their histories, helped them navigate legal systems in both the UK and their home countries, and, where appropriate, supported return.

The CSJ also visited Hope for Southall Street Homeless (HSSH), a small charity based in Southall, west London, who work predominantly with men from the Punjab region of India. Over the course of 10 years to June 2026, HSSH has supported 88 non-UK nationals to make a dignified return to their home country.

<sup>76</sup> Barka UK, Barka UK Reconnections Project, n.d. Accessed: <https://barkauk.org/our-services/reconnections-project/>.

<sup>77</sup> MHCLG, Systems change learning: A practical guide from the Changing Futures programme, December 2025, p. 83.

## Case Study: Hope for Southall Street Homeless

HSSH is a small independent charity providing day centre services to rough sleepers in Southall, west London. With a team of just four, HSSH supports on average 70 people a week, of which approximately 90 per cent are actively sleeping rough at any one time.

95 per cent of HSSH's clients are men from the Punjab region of India, with smaller numbers from countries like Sri Lanka and the UK. Many came to the UK to work and send money home; when those ambitions fell short, they became street homeless. A large proportion have no recourse to public funds, and so are ineligible for homelessness assistance or benefits. The more time individuals spend on the streets, the more likely they are to be targets for drug dealers and criminal gangs.

John Murphy, the General Secretary of HSSH, told us that for many of these men the best route out of homelessness is a supported return home. While only one of its staff speaks those clients' languages, and a number of families have an English-speaker, it does mean that they can speak directly to relatives in India and gauge whether a return would be welcomed. The ability of a staff member to speak a person's language and relate to them culturally is essential to making a successful reconnection, a finding which echoes that of the London SIB.

Reconnection can take a long time. Shame, cultural expectations, and bureaucratic difficulties make returning difficult for many of HSSH's clients. Family relationships are often strained, and individuals often feel a sense of failure if they haven't made a successful life in the UK.

HSSH say that quick and adequate support provided by the Voluntary Returns Service is crucial to making reconnections work. The £3,000 financial support payment provides a meaningful incentive, but often uncertain entitlements and delays make the prospect of return too much of a risk for clients. HSSH told us that in the past reconnections worked "like clockwork" and included accommodation, a guarantee of the £3,000 financial support payment, and travel details. This enabled them to support many to return to their country of origin.

However, HSSH say the system has slowed and reconnecting has become more difficult. This is not only a Home Office problem, with foreign embassies being slow and uncooperative in issuing emergency travel documents or identification.

When a reconnection comes together it can transform the life of an individual. Malik, left India at the age of 17, and spent most of 16 years sleeping rough in West London. During this time, he had become dependent on alcohol and throughout the Covid lockdown his withdrawal symptoms became unmanageable.

HSSH supported Malik to access detox services and was accompanied by his support worker to appointments. In the meantime, the charity helped him to secure travel documents and financial support from the Voluntary Returns Service. Malik made a return to India in January 2021 and was able to make a successful reconnection with his family.

Over the last 10 years, as to June 2026, HSSH has supported 88 non-UK nationals to make a reconnection in their home countries.

The Netherlands is also a case study of how a comparable country is tackling high levels of migrant rough sleeping. The Dutch government funded a pilot in six municipalities with the aim of supporting rough

sleepers from other EU countries who had limited or no access to Dutch support services. The pilot has been successful at helping EU nationals back into work, or to return to their home country.

### Case study: The Netherlands

The Dutch government has funded a dedicated programme of short-term accommodation and support for homeless EU citizens who are ineligible for regular social services and support. Funding was provided to six municipalities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Eindhoven and Venlo – which were given freedom to design services specifically for this target group, working in partnership with specialist charities such as Barka to help people either move back into work and housing in the Netherlands, or return to their home country.<sup>78</sup>

Across the pilots, municipalities used this funding to create tailored shelters and outreach services for EU migrants, with some cities setting up separate shelters for migrants and others using hotel places or dedicated beds within existing services. In the first six months, 875 people were accommodated, with 62 per cent achieving a positive move on, either securing employment with accommodation in the Netherlands, or returning to their country of origin.<sup>79</sup> Four of the municipalities ran separate shelters exclusively for EU migrants and highlighted the importance of providing support in people’s native languages to build trust and engagement.<sup>80</sup>

Respondents to the Dutch evaluation stressed the need to give homeless EU citizens a clear and honest explanation of their realistic options in the Netherlands, with three main outcomes identified: (1) a route back into work and housing in the Netherlands; (2) voluntary return to their country of origin; or (3) forced return for those with no lawful basis to remain.<sup>81</sup> The evaluation concluded that establishing a clear assessment point or centre for homeless EU nationals would be beneficial, so that people receive upfront guidance on their prospects and rights and are not passed between multiple services without a plan.<sup>82</sup>

Reporting in 2025 indicated that Amsterdam had supported 386 homeless migrant workers to return to their home countries in a single year, while across six participating cities around 700 people had accepted offers of help to go home, with Barka playing a central role in preparation and follow-up.<sup>83</sup>

In the UK, previous government policy has incentivised voluntary return as a preferential option, providing a basis for the government to make this a cornerstone of their response to non-UK national rough sleeping.

The London Homelessness Social Impact Bond (SIB), a four-year payment by results programme launched in 2012, had explicit targets concerning the reconnection of non-UK nationals rough sleeping with their country of origin. 25 per cent of the allocated funding was reserved for reconnection, providing a tangible financial incentive for providers to reconnect migrant rough sleepers to their home countries.<sup>84</sup>

78 Significant Public, Evaluatie Kortdurende Opvang Dakloze EU-Burgers: Eindmeting, June 2024, p. 3.

79 Ibid, p. 3.

80 Ibid, p. 29.

81 Ibid, p. 30.

82 Ibid, p. 33.

83 Trouw, Hundreds of homeless migrant workers have been returned to Eastern Europe. “They’re not happy about it, but it’s their salvation”, February 2025. Accessed: [www.trouw.nl/binnenland/honderden-dakloze-arbeidsmigranten-zijn-teruggebracht-naar-oost-europa-ze-worden-er-niet-blij-van-maar-het-is-hun-redding-b-17d348e](https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/honderden-dakloze-arbeidsmigranten-zijn-teruggebracht-naar-oost-europa-ze-worden-er-niet-blij-van-maar-het-is-hun-redding-b-17d348e).

84 Department for Communities and Local Government, Qualitative Evaluation of the London Homelessness Social Impact Bond (SIB), November 2017, p. 16.

83 individuals achieved sustained reconnection in their home countries, and the impact evaluation identified that the London SIB had a significant positive impact on non-UK national reconnections when compared to a comparison group.<sup>85</sup> This demonstrates how payment by results targets can have a positive impact on service delivery and outcomes achieved, providing a potential commissioning blueprint for local authorities.

The London SIB contains the basis for how the government might set a preferential option for voluntary return within its response to non-UK national rough sleeping. The SIB is an example of how to prioritise certain outcomes, and the government should build upon this, and the learnings from partner charities, St Mungo's and Thames Reach, to operationalise a preference for voluntary return.

Setting a preference for voluntary return within the government's response to rough sleeping could be achieved by amending the Outcomes Framework set for local government. The Outcomes Framework sets out the national priority outcomes for local government across a range of different policy areas, including homelessness. At present the homelessness priority outcome is: "To prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping", with the following priority outcome metrics:<sup>86</sup>

- › Households with children in temporary accommodation.
- › Families in bed and breakfast (B&B) over six weeks.
- › Success at preventing and relieving homelessness.
- › People sleeping rough on a single night.
- › People sleeping rough over the month who are long-term.

Local authorities are expected to set action plans with local targets which improve performance against each of the Outcomes Framework metrics above. To incentivise local authorities to prioritise voluntary returns of non-UK nationals rough sleeping, we propose that a new priority metric is added to the above: "Success at reconnecting non-UK nationals sleeping rough to their home countries", measured by the number of people with a confirmed reconnection outside of the UK, as modelled in the London SIB.<sup>87</sup>

Voluntary returns, or reconnections, should be accompanied by advice and guidance on how to successfully commission and deliver services, building on the best practice of third sector organisations like Barka and HSSH. The government should set an explicit expectation that reconnection services operate based on the learnings of existing services and the London Homelessness SIB. This should be supported by the new MRSU. The London Homelessness SIB recommended that reconnection services include:<sup>88</sup>

- › Personalised support: the importance of developing long-term trusting relationships with the migrant cohort, including support staff that can speak native languages, and adapting support on a case-by-case basis.
- › Partnerships and support in home countries: this includes partnerships with the Home Office and UK services, as well as those in home countries. For example, when delivering the London Homelessness SIB, St Mungo's travelled to Poland to make links with services there. Providers reinforced the importance of ensuring support services were in place when a client returned, which was considered important in sustaining a reconnection, and preventing a return to the UK.

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85 Department for Communities and Local Government, *The impact evaluation of the London Homelessness Social Impact Bond*, November 2017, p. 33.

86 MHCLG, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, December 2025, pp. 80-81.

87 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Qualitative Evaluation of the London Homelessness Social Impact Bond (SIB)*, November 2017, p. 16.

88 *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

To further strengthen support during a voluntary return, the government could consider measuring success not just by the sustained reconnection of a person after six months, but also by their safety, stability, and connection with support in their home country.

## RECOMMENDATION

MHCLG and the Home Office should create a joint departmental MRSU, as part of a new approach to restoring control over high levels of non-UK national rough sleeping. We recommend that the following principles underpin a new approach to non-UK national rough sleeping.

### **Principle One: Resolve immigration status and extend support.**

The government should ensure that every non-UK national sleeping rough is able to resolve their immigration status to determine their right to remain in the UK and, following that, their options for support. The MRSU should oversee a new statutory duty requiring all local authorities and frontline homelessness services working with people experiencing rough sleeping to collaborate with the Home Office and Immigration Enforcement teams in all cases involving non-UK nationals. In practice, this would mean that whenever a non-UK national is identified sleeping rough, services would be required to obtain an immigration status check. It is important that rough sleepers can access immediate safe shelter prior to an immigration check, with initial support not being predicated on a status check via the HES.

The HES, which identifies non-UK rough sleepers who qualify for public support, should become a key touchpoint for all homelessness services whenever a non-UK national rough sleeper is identified. HES should become the default triage mechanism used by local authorities and frontline services to confirm immigration status, clarify eligibility for public funds, and identify appropriate support options.

For those with permission to remain, support should include housing options, but also help with looking for work, accessing benefits, referrals to services for alcohol, substance misuse or mental health issues, the National Referral Mechanism for potential victims of modern slavery, as well as new access to the Voluntary Returns Service. This will help ensure that people with a lawful right to remain in the UK can regularise their status and move away from the street.

Furthermore, to remove incentives to prolong rough sleeping in the hope of securing residence in the UK, the Home Office should consider removing the 20-year residence rule which allows an individual to settle their status in the UK despite having been in the country unlawfully until that point.

### **Principle Two: Enforce immigration law.**

The government must be willing to enforce immigration law to accelerate the return of non-UK nationals sleeping rough who have no permission to remain in the UK. To operationalise this principle, the MRSU should ensure that there is a clear and consistent process for progressing cases from initial check via the HES through to resolution. Building upon the existing HES, the government should require that when an individual is found to have no permission to remain, the Home Office issues a clear resolution plan for their case. This plan should be shared with the individual, with any support workers, and relevant agencies involved, setting out appeals routes, options for voluntary return, and the consequences of refusing to engage.

This resolution plan should give the opportunity for voluntary return, with the expectation that individuals are offered meaningful assistance to return to, and reintegrate in, their home country. This should build upon best practice models of support and partnership with services in a person's country of origin. To ensure quick progression of cases, the Voluntary Returns Service should have a dedicated point of contact for rough sleeping cases, and the government should expect that, by the end of the Parliament, every local authority and frontline homelessness organisation has an active working relationship with the Voluntary Returns Service.

Where voluntary return is refused, the plan should move to an enforced return. This principle is essential for maintaining the integrity of the UK immigration system.

**Principle Three: Set a preferential option for voluntary return.**

The government should set a preferential option for voluntary return, making clear that a core policy aim for non-UK nationals sleeping rough is a dignified reconnection with their home country.

The MRSU should work with MHCLG to embed this preference within the Outcomes Framework for local government by introducing a new homelessness priority metric for the reconnection of non-UK nationals rough sleeping, measured by the number of people with a confirmed reconnection outside the UK. As with existing metrics, local authorities would be required to create action plans with local targets to improve performance against this measure, ensuring that reconnection becomes a core outcome rather than an optional extra.

Alongside this, the MHCLG should issue detailed guidance on how to commission and deliver high quality reconnection services, drawing on best practice from organisations such as Barka, HSSH, and programmes like the London Homelessness SIB. This guidance should emphasise personalised support, the importance of staff who speak migrants' languages and understand their cultures, and strong partnerships with services in countries of origin so that people are met, accommodated, and supported on arrival rather than being left at risk of returning to homelessness. The government could strengthen this aspect by assessing the safety, stability, and wellbeing of people after reconnection, rather than treating the act of return alone as a successful outcome.

To incentivise a greater number of non-UK nationals who have permission to remain in the UK to make a reconnection, we recommend that the Home Office extend access to the Voluntary Returns Service and up to £3,000 in financial support to all non-UK nationals who have slept rough, regardless of immigration status, on the condition they have slept rough at least once in the 12 months prior to an application to the Voluntary Returns Service, and have been verified by an official outreach team. A re-entry ban should be imposed following a return regardless of existing permission to stay in the UK, in line with Home Office rules.

By embedding a preferential option for voluntary return in this way, the government can relieve pressure on the UK homelessness system, ensure good value for money for the taxpayer, and ensure that non-UK nationals sleeping rough are offered long-term pathways out of homelessness.

## 3.3 Tackle the root causes of poverty

The government has made a welcome commitment to prevention within *A National Plan to End Homelessness*. Only by addressing the root causes of poverty can the government make a long-term change to homelessness and rough sleeping trends.

The homelessness strategy recognises family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, addiction, and problem debt as causes and risk factors for homelessness. Below, we consider how the government can strengthen its plan to prevent homelessness.

### 3.3.1 Family breakdown

The homelessness strategy recognises Family Hubs as critical in identifying emerging problems among families.<sup>89</sup> The government should strengthen its commitment to Family Hubs in the homelessness strategy by:

1. Moving birth registrations onto these premises to connect families with support from the start. This should include: giving parenting advice and not just birthing advice, ensuring fathers are named on birth certificates, practising more father-inclusive approaches to engaging dads by changing opening hours, and more visibly approaching and supporting men as they become fathers.
2. Deliver relationship support services in partnership with Family Hubs.
3. Ensure Family Hubs have more flexible opening hours, particularly after work and on weekends to widen access to parents.

Learn more about these recommendations by reading the CSJ's *Lost Boys: Boyhood* report from December 2025.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.3.2 Educational failure

The homelessness strategy references school absence as a risk factor for homelessness. To turbo-charge government efforts to end the crisis of school absence effecting over 1.4 million children in Spring 2025,<sup>91</sup> the government should commit to the following.

1. Scale up attendance mentors nationally. The government's expansion of attendance mentors so that they will reach 5,300 children a year is welcome but still only covers just three per cent of severely absent pupils.
2. Introduce a new mandatory Attendance Awareness Course at the beginning of the legal intervention process for unauthorised absence. Non-attendance or refusal should result in receipt of an increased fine of £200, or £100 if paid within 21 days.
3. Expand access to sport at school which is proven to increase attendance, grades, and engagement. The government should introduce an enrichment guarantee for young people, providing up to five hours a week of extracurricular activities like sport.

Learn more about these recommendations by reading the CSJ's *Absent Ambition: Addressing the root causes of school absence* report from September 2025.<sup>92</sup>

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89 MHCLG, *A National Plan to End Homelessness*, December 2025, p. 43.

90 CSJ, *Lost Boys: Boyhood*, December 2025.

91 CSJ, *School Absence Tracker: A termly analysis of official data relating to absence from schools*, October 2025.

92 CSJ, *Absent Ambition: Addressing the root causes of school absence*, September 2025.

### 3.3.3 Worklessness

The homelessness strategy recognises the importance of helping people to afford their housing by increasing their income and explicitly recognises the problem of economic inactivity as undermining this aim.<sup>93</sup> To take their reforms to tackle economic inactivity further, the government should introduce the following.

1. A Future Workforce Credit to incentivise employers to recruit and upskill NEETs aged 16-24. The Credit would be set at 30 per cent of an employee's salary. It would be worth over £5,800 for a 19-year-old employee working full-time (37.5 hours), more than the apprenticeship incentive and NICs relief combined.
2. Reforms to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Universal Credit (UC) to reinvest one billion pounds in front-line support for people with mental health conditions.
3. A new National Work and Health Service to provide timely, early intervention to support those struggling with their mental health and require support to find and keep employment.

Learn more about these recommendations by reading the CSJ's *Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work* report from August 2025.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.3.4 Addiction

The 2025 Rough Sleeping Questionnaire found that 54 per cent of people sleeping rough reported a substance misuse need within the past year.<sup>95</sup> A tragic 44 per cent of homelessness deaths are attributed to drug and alcohol causes.<sup>96</sup> The homelessness strategy states that drug dependency is a particular risk factor for repeat homelessness.<sup>97</sup> To tackle the hidden crisis of drug addiction in the UK, the government should:

1. Resist moves to liberalise laws on drug possession at a central, devolved, and localised level, and instead invest in treatment and recovery.
2. Re-commit to long-term, ring-fenced funding for drug treatment services. This should include a three-to-five-year funding plan to allow for better service planning and expansion of treatment options for those in community settings.
3. Recognise and fund the growing need for supporting those with cannabis induced psychosis.

Learn more about these recommendations by reading the CSJ's *Still Ambitious for Recovery: How to address illegal drug addiction and strengthen law enforcement's role* published in December 2024.<sup>98</sup>

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93 MHCLG, A National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025, p. 36.

94 CSJ, *Wasted Youth: Helping Britain's young adults into work*, August 2025.

95 MHCLG, *Rough sleeping questionnaire 2025: Headline findings*, November 2025.

96 MHCLG, A National Plan to End Homelessness, December 2025, p. 71.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

98 CSJ, *Still Ambitious for Recovery: How to address illegal drug addiction and strengthen law enforcement's role*, December 2024.

### 3.3.5 Problem debt

The homelessness strategy rightly recognises support with debt as a key area for recovery, thus helping to prevent repeat homelessness.<sup>99</sup> However, its plans for policy reform are limited, so to strengthen this critical area of prevention, the CSJ recommends that the government do the following.

1. Reduce the proportion of UC standard allowance that can be clawed back in debt repayments to 10 per cent.
2. Introduce affordability assessments into the benefits deductions process.
3. Reverse the transfer of legacy tax credit debt from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to the DWP.

Learn more about these recommendations by reading the CSJ's *A United Nation: How to fix broken Britain* published in September 2024.<sup>100</sup>

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99 CSJ, *A United Nation: How to fix broken Britain*, September 2024.

100 CSJ, *A United Nation: How to fix broken Britain*, September 2024.



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