

General points raised

The last few weeks have been generally positive for those of the Panel working within the sector. However, there have been some concerns relating to the lack of support local authorities are providing to some verified rough sleepers.

“We referred 10 people for accommodation, 9 verified rough sleepers. And we got 10 refusals.”
Member of National Advisory Panel

“I think local authority’s hands are tied. If there is a reason they cannot accommodate someone, that’s going to happen.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

Some pressures have been relived in particular areas where Day Centres have opened. However, there do remain concerns with the approach taken to move-on from the temporary hotel accommodation, which in one area in particular does not appear to be strategic or proactive.

“It’s got a lot better with Day Centres open.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

“The Hotel’s due to close. But they’re not thinking of it as positive move-on’s, it’s just a bit of a rush.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

As we have noted previously, Expert Link and our National Advisory Panel considers the requirement within para 53 of the Next Steps guidance for local areas to involve ‘service-users’ in their bid as incredibly positive. As a Panel we are aware of one area in particular embracing this approach, and others who are working towards it. Regretfully, some local authorities are not doing so, with a number that we are aware of citing the short deadline.

“Really positive from Westminster – there’s a meeting set up all about co-production. It’s going really, really well.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

“We’ve hosted meetings with councillors and around six people who had experienced homelessness. Makes the process more robust.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

“We’re having some discussions around Next Steps. I’m really worried about co-production.”
Member of National Advisory Panel

“Trying to talk to people high above about what lived experience co-production there’ll be. Apparently there isn’t. There’s a tight deadline so they won’t have time to bring people together.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

“The deadline is quite useful, because it demonstrates that people who should have been doing stuff already aren’t.” **Member of National Advisory Panel**

Street Counts

Our discussion focussed around a number of themes:

i. What do the numbers mean?

It is the opinion of the Panel that although the Street Count is designed to be a snapshot of the number of people who meet a definition of rough sleeping on a particular night, the figures are not used in this way publicly, whether by Government or other bodies.

In particular, political commentary surrounding the rising or falling trends in numbers does not appreciate what exactly a snapshot is, the difference between counts and estimates, and the effect that robustness of methodology can have on the figures.

*“I understand it’s a snapshot, but a lot of people who look at the figures don’t treat them like that.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Higher numbers don’t mean that numbers go up, and lower that go down. They just mean that you might have a better methodology. They might just be indicative about how much time and effort has gone into delivering an effective process.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Comparing counts and estimates is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. So if someone does a count one year and an estimate the next year it’s bound to change.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“The real risk is the politics element. That they’re used to say something that they are not.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

ii. How data collection can affect immediate support

Regretfully, the mechanisms of data collection can have inadvertent effect on support provided. There are instances where people who have not been counted do not receive support in forthcoming weeks. Further, the data can influence behaviours of workers, who have to expend limited resources on the exercise.

*“It’s very frustrating, that if someone is found, and not bedded down, there’s no focus on them. The following week, the support and the focus is on those who were counted.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Be mindful that the data will drive work. It’s important for future provision, but I feel like there’s so much pressure on local authorities to collect data, and that’s put onto workers.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Data collection also puts unnecessary hostility onto people who are sleeping rough. Many times people will already be known to services, but they are still woken up and required to respond to questions they have answered previously and are recorded locally. Sometimes the approach by people conducting the counts is heavy handed.

*“You want to try and not go through conversations unnecessarily. If you know that you have the information in the system you don’t want to regather it.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“It is very rare that we would not know who a rough sleeper was so the data needed was hardly ever needed to get from waking them up.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Need the right people who are engaging and compassionate doing the counts too and not police, ASB officers etc.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

It is the view of the Panel that some of the data collection may breach legal standards. We know of instances where people who do not consent to have their data collected still do so, including highly sensitive information relating to mental and physical health.

*“I have concern with how the data is handled. It’s not taken with consent. The way it’s done is not legal. Some people say they don’t want to be involved, but then their mental health is recorded!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

iii. How the data collects a limited picture within the timeframe

Notwithstanding issues relating to how counts can be manipulated (see next section), there are questions relating to how accurate the information is *on its own terms*. There are instances where people are not counted who would meet the definition, due to subjective interpretations of the time frames when a count takes place.

Night shelters are not routinely considered (although estimates are sometimes provided).

We would recommend that where people know that someone has been rough sleeping, though in the particular instance they are not bedded down, then that individual is consider rough sleeping for the purposes of the count.

*“Outreach worker denied there were rough sleepers in the car park, and there was a camera showing they were there!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“It’s so open to interpretation. The council said the time had stopped, and we just walked past about 20 people.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I wonder if there’s scope for if someone has been bedded down in the last fourteen days on your usual sweeps, they should be included.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

iv. Manipulation of the figures

In our experience there are a number of ways that local authorities can, and have, manipulated the street count figures. This can be, for example, agreeing specific times when counts will take place which are unlikely to provide a representative sample.

*“I think the manipulation comes from local authorities being given the freedom with the days and the times etc. So we’ve had it where we’d go out really early, then five o clock, then change from one and a half to three hours.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

In some instances, outreach workers will go on additional shifts on the day of the count, to support people into accommodation just prior to a count taking place. Some local authorities also put additional work in just before the day of the count to reduce the numbers from what would be expected. It should be noted that although all work is positive, when this is for such a

short period it is clear that it does not meet the genuine aims of the Government to end rough sleeping.

*“I’ve noticed that when go out to do the count there’s hardly anyone around. Where have all these people gone. There were loads a couple of days ago.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Don’t let outreach teams go out on the morning or evening on the day of the count, we would get at least 5 into temp a/c on those shifts.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We would have the commissioner and staff on at our team every day for the 3 weeks prior to produce numbers and housing plans for everyone. Even if there were no places for people they would be used to justify getting people into temp B&Bs until the plan came to fruition.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We had a time when we had extra accommodation provision on the days up to a count, and then that went after the count.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Some other approaches are used to simply move people away from particular areas without any genuine support. This can include police creating hostile environments, and the provision of day travel cards.

*“In [X] we would see rough sleepers from [Y] who had moved as the police had kept hassling them. They never said the police directly told them to move but it was made so hostile that people left to go over the borough boundaries.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We’ve had police disperse people out of the city centre the day before the count. If people are outside the city centre they are much more visible and easy to locate.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Someone gives them a travel card, and asks them to leave for the day or night. This was some years ago, not sure if it’s still happening.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

v. Funding and politicisation

Much of the issues relating to the street counts stem from the funding that is attached to them.

Local authorities can be incentivised to either have high or low numbers to demonstrate that they require additional funding to support their population, or in contrast to demonstrate that the support that they provide is effective.

*“You had to demonstrate that your numbers were going down to get funding. That creates that kind of culture.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I think there might be a blind spot around councillors and councils understanding what these figures actually mean. This can lead to local pressures to come in with a lower number as a sign of “success.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

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*“We did it in 2008 and we had the second highest in the country, and we got shat on. They said we were making it up. Then they came and did it with us and it was the same!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“There is an overt political pressure. Organisations were told that if we had a high count, there’d be more money.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Big question about whether to do an honest street count or one that got people into accommodation. In the month before, people are moved off the streets. Maybe get sorted, but maybe just back onto the streets (after the count).” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

We would recommend that for the street counts to truly give an indication of levels of rough sleeping, incentives need to be detached from the process. Funding allocations will therefore need to be determined through other mechanisms.

*“People are incentivised to have low numbers or high numbers. We need to take that incentive away.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

About Expert Link

Expert Link is a peer led organisation championing the voice of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, including homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, offending and domestic violence and abuse. We advocate for a world where people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages are treated as equal partners in decisions made about their lives.