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Persistent Rough Sleeping in Nottingham: a Summary Report



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The Research

Concerns about rising levels of rough sleeping in Nottingham combined with evidence from elsewhere prompted an investigation into how far this increase might have arisen not just from more people coming on to the streets, but also from people remaining there longer or repeatedly returning because of the precariousness of available solutions. The research sought to uncover the characteristics that distinguish persistent rough sleepers from the wider street homeless population, and any common features in their circumstances that might help to explain persistence.

A persistent rough sleeper is someone who was recorded sleeping rough on at least 10% of nights between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017, i.e. 36 nights (the ‘sustained’), or who has been seen sleeping rough in at least three out of the six years between 2012 and 2017 (the ‘recurrent’).

The study was undertaken by staff at Nottingham Trent University and Opportunity Nottingham (ON) with help from the Nottingham Street Outreach Team (SOT). The following data sources were used:

- Quarterly data collected on ON Beneficiaries by their Personal Development Coordinators (PDCs) to track changes in personal characteristics and circumstances, use of services and progress against two indicators: the NDT or ‘chaos’ index and the Outcome Star score.
- Records compiled monthly by the SOT based on information that rough sleepers are willing to provide on their characteristics and personal circumstances.
- Qualitative reflections and commentary recorded in the above data sets by PDCs and SOT members that provide a narrative of the changing lives of Beneficiaries and those seen rough sleeping.
- A focus group with the SOT undertaken during September 2017 to explore the reasons for persistent rough sleeping that members have discovered arising from their daily encounters with rough sleepers.



Characteristics of Persistent Rough Sleepers

There were **74 persistent rough sleepers** who met the above definition, consisting of five who were both sustained and recurrent, 35 who were sustained and 34 who were recurrent. Of these,

- **10 were women (14%) and 64 men.**
- **62 were recorded as of White British ethnicity (84%),** most of the others being White (Other).
- **13 were recorded as having a disability (18%).**

ON Beneficiaries are recruited to the programme because they are assessed as having at least three of the four prescribed complex needs: homelessness, substance misuse, mental ill-health and offending. The SOT also records support needs in addition to homelessness among people seen rough sleeping, though definitions might differ from those of ON. Data reveals that persistent rough sleepers register higher levels of all of these support needs than either ON Beneficiaries or rough sleepers generally.

- **21 out of the 29 persistent rough sleepers who are ON Beneficiaries have all four complex needs (72%), the remainder having three.** The corresponding figures for the overall Beneficiary population whose needs are known are 53% with four needs, 45% with three and 2% with two.

- **67 out of the 74 persistent rough sleepers have problems with substance use (91%).**
- **49 are offenders or at risk of offending (66%).**
- **37 have mental health problems (50%).**

More detailed quantitative analysis has only been possible for the 29 persistent rough sleepers who were ON Beneficiaries during the survey period. Comparison with the full Beneficiary cohort (302 at the time of the survey) may shed some light on any distinguishing features of persistent rough sleepers, provided no statistical significance is attached.

- **11 (38%) had spent at least two weeks in prison since engaging with ON**, compared with 51 (17%) of the whole Beneficiary cohort.
- **16 (55%) had experienced at least one eviction from accommodation**, compared with 74 (25%) of Beneficiaries overall.
- **15 (52%) reported being excluded from a service because of unacceptable behaviour during at least one quarter**, compared with 48 (16%) of Beneficiaries overall.
- **5 (17%) reported being refused a service for failure to meet eligibility criteria in at least one quarter**, compared with 18 (6%) of Beneficiaries overall.
- With regard to illicit sources of income (family and friends, begging, sex work, illegal activity, etc.), only begging showed an appreciable difference, with **8 persistent rough sleepers (28%) securing income in this way**, compared with 35 (12%) of Beneficiaries in general.



Common Factors Found in Persistent Rough Sleeping

The following were found repeatedly in narrative provided by PDCs and SOT members. They are not listed in any particular order of importance, and accounts of the varied effects of each factor on the sustained and the recurrent can be found in the full report .

- 1) Both rough sleepers themselves and those who work with them are encountering a **diminishing range of options** when seeking to leave the streets, arising from cuts in public funding and adverse changes in the housing market. Hostels have closed, Housing Benefit availability is more restricted, affordable tenancies are more limited in terms of quantity and quality, and the supply of tenancy support has all but dried up.
- 2) **Financial issues** loom large in the lives of many rough sleepers. This is particularly true of migrants with no recourse to public funds, but is also the case with many indigenous rough sleepers who encounter restricted access to welfare benefits. Access may also be impeded by debts incurred in previous accommodation. The structures needed to sustain benefit claims may result in a preference for begging which is unreliable as a source of income and may thereby put accommodation at risk, something particularly relevant to the recurrent.
- 3) The high proportion of persistent rough sleepers who experience prison sentences means that **prison discharge** frequently precipitates a return to previous chaotic lifestyles, even amongst those who may have had some form of accommodation, or otherwise made progress in recovery, immediately before sentencing.
- 4) The operation of homelessness legislation may act as a barrier in many cases. For instance, rough sleepers fleeing from another locality may be seen as having **no local connection** to Nottingham, while others vacating accommodation because of intimidation may be seen as **intentionally homeless** and single rough sleepers in general may struggle to prove **priority need** status.

- 5) The **level of complex** need encountered in the persistent rough sleeper population generates particular problems in the context of diminishing specialist facilities and tenancy support. The result is unsuitable referral to whatever hostel accommodation is available or premature referral to move-on accommodation, both of which may break down, resulting in eviction.
- 6) As a result of this and other experiences, rough sleepers may carry a baggage of **past evictions and negative risk assessments** which leave them barred from many facilities and make them hard to accommodate. Moreover, rough sleepers frequently miss out on mental health or other assessments that might give access to specialised support because of the logistics of conducting assessments with rough sleepers.
- 7) The narratives of many persistent rough sleepers recount an **ambivalent relationship with hostel accommodation**. There are stories of evictions for rent arrears or inappropriate behaviour. There are stories of abandonment for experiences of intimidation or financial exploitation by other residents. As a result, many refuse offers out of fear of who they might encounter, or of being lured into lifestyles from which they seek to escape.
- 8) **Personal relationships may have a toxic effect** in the lives of persistent rough sleepers. This sometimes affects women more than men, but not always. It is the case that women are more likely to be trapped in exploitative and abusive relationships which impede solutions to their housing problems. Local authorities are precluded from housing a homeless woman with a partner with whom she is at risk of harm. However, other Beneficiaries (men and women) may be impaired by loyalty to a partner with whom they have a positive relationship. Meanwhile, others remain homeless from fear of those with whom they might be located. This might be a hostel or shared accommodation, or the only neighbourhood where they have a local connection.
- 9) A combination of all the above often results in **an overall disillusionment with what is perceived as a hostile system** that may end up making the streets attractive. The experience of repeated failure, the sense of there being no alternative and the effect of growing numbers in generating a mutually supporting community are generating an inertia in engaging persistent rough sleepers in the pursuit of better options.

