

60-SECOND SUMMARY

Scenes of rolling hills, countryside pursuits and nostalgic ideas about village life can present rural living as offering opportunities for people to escape the pressures associated with England's urban centres, to access a better quality of life. But these idyllic images mask significant experiences of inequality and deprivation to which rural communities are vulnerable.

Homelessness across England is on the rise. The number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities, in temporary accommodation, and/or rough sleeping have all increased since 2010. Homelessness is traditionally depicted as an urban phenomenon yet many households in rural areas are threatened with or experience homelessness due to considerable shortages of affordable and appropriate housing types and tenures in rural areas.

Challenges associated with preventing and relieving homelessness in rural areas can also be different, exacerbated by: poor economies of scale; poor transport connections; constrained resourcing for specialist services; isolated communities; and limited alternative and emergency housing provision. The negative impact on affected households is no less significant than in urban areas – and could be even more so.

Critical to the success of implementing homelessness legislation – and directing any resources – will be ensuring a full understanding of the homelessness challenge in any given area. This report starts to explore the scale and nature of homelessness in rural areas, how it varies from urban areas, and how rural homelessness strategies might be adapted to better reflect the distinct issues they face.

KEY FINDINGS

- In 2015/16, 6,270 households were accepted as homeless in England's 91 mainly and largely rural local authorities, amounting to an average of 1.3 in every 1,000 households.
- In 16 of these predominantly rural LAs, at least two in every 1,000 households was accepted as homeless – more than in urban areas in 2010/11.
- In 2015/16, mainly and largely rural areas in England reported making **12,977 decisions on homelessness approaches – 11 per cent of local authority decisions, nationally** – reflecting a not insignificant challenge in which many households are experiencing housing difficulties.
- From 2010 to 2016, **mainly rural local authorities recorded a rise from 191 to 252 rough sleepers – an increase of 32 per cent. In largely rural areas there has been a leap of 52 per cent**, and an almost doubling in 'urban areas with significant rural' (97 per cent).
- **Many cases of homelessness in rural areas go undetected**, with individuals more likely to bed down in alternative countryside locations, such as outhouses, barns, tents and parked cars. Difficulties accessing or being identified by LA services can mean households remain uncounted in official records.
- The causes of homelessness most frequently relate to the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy or family breakdown. Rural areas can experience additional challenges which exacerbate these struggles: **lower levels of housing affordability; shortages of appropriate tenure options; high prevalence of second and holiday homes; and decline in LA-owned housing stock.**

- Delivering services to prevent and relieve homelessness in rural areas can be particularly difficult due to: balancing economies of scale; providing specialist services; overcoming travel distances and accessing public transport; reaching isolated groups; commissioning in two-tier structures; ensuring accurate monitoring and reporting; finding alternative accommodation; and managing falling local authority budgets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Central to addressing homelessness in rural areas will be making sure rural housing markets work for their resident populations by providing affordable accommodation across a range of tenures and types of home.

1. Local and combined authorities should enter into two-way negotiations with central government to develop bespoke devolution deals on housing and planning. Rural areas should be clear in identifying their rural-specific challenges and ways in which devolution will help them to implement more locally-focussed solutions. Rural areas facing significant pressures associated with holiday and second homes should aim to negotiate devolution powers over council tax, including more flexibility on empty home premiums, to finance dedicated temporary accommodation and homelessness services.

For homelessness itself, the research identifies a number of things that could be pursued locally now.

2. Central government should develop a new national homelessness strategy, taking the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 as its lead. This should be cross-government and include an assessment of homelessness in rural areas, covering its scale and nature and the distinct challenges faced by rural areas. It should also provide comprehensive rural-specific guidance on how to prevent and relieve homelessness.
3. All rural areas should explore setting up rural homelessness forums as a place for relevant local bodies and agencies – and neighbouring authorities – to share intelligence and best practice and to provide a network through which to develop partnership models for service delivery. These forums should conduct an audit of homelessness provision and related services in their areas to understand the type and reach of services on offer; the challenges they face; and where opportunities exist for linking up.
4. Rural homelessness forums should devise a standard monitoring form through which this information can be collected by services and agencies when individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness approach them.
5. All LAs should record the ‘home’ LA of homeless households during initial homelessness assessments through standardised monitoring forms and include this in their quarterly returns to government. This information should then be collated by DCLG to establish patterns of homelessness migration into, within, and out of rural areas.
6. LAs, working through rural homelessness forums, should set up rural community hubs, using local buildings and running weekly drop-in sessions which bring together relevant services to provide advice and support those at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The progressive policy think tank

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