

UNSEEN, UNHOUSED, UNACCEPTABLE: HOUSING FIRST FOR RURAL ENGLAND



ABOUT THIS REVIEW

Homelessness is on the rise across England. Despite the prevailing image of homelessness as occurring in cities, rural areas have seen a sharp increase in recent years. The isolation of rural communities makes it particularly hard to escape and recover from homelessness.

English Rural Housing Association, Porchlight poverty, health and housing charity, and Commonweal Housing have come together in a partnership to explore how we can scale up Housing First approaches in rural communities to end homelessness for good.



The isolation of rural communities makes it particularly hard to escape and recover from homelessness... Rural areas would particularly benefit from Housing First solutions, because of their isolation and the challenges of delivering bricks and mortar support services.

This short report summarises the evidence gathered to determine if and how Housing First can be deployed to tackle the current crisis of rural homelessness.

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark jacket, looking out from inside a tent. The tent is made of dark material with a yellow stripe. The background shows green foliage.

THE PROBLEM:

THE UNAFFORDABILITY CRISIS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IS DRIVING A RURAL HOMELESSNESS EMERGENCY

HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL ENGLAND IS ON THE RISE

There was a 24% rise in rural rough sleeping in just one year between 2021 and 2022,¹ and research from CPRE has shown that in the five years leading up to 2023 there was a 40% rise in wider rural homelessness.² This is the dangerous result of the cost-of-living, housing supply and affordability crises, pushing a safe and secure place to live out of reach for too many.

DESPITE THE PREVAILING IMAGE OF HOMELESSNESS AS OCCURRING IN CITIES, WE KNOW THAT HOMELESSNESS CAN OCCUR ANYWHERE

2023 revealed rural homelessness to be less visible but present regardless. People are being left isolated in rural communities, without a place to call home, due to a lack of affordable homes, services, and adequate support. Just 8% of homes in rural areas are affordable, compared to 17% in urban areas, leaving over 300,000 households languishing on social housing waiting lists.

THE CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS ARE SIMILAR TO THOSE IN URBAN AREAS, BUT A LACK OF FUNDING AND SUPPORT SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS PUSHES PEOPLE INTO URBAN CENTRES

In our review of evidence we identified that a lack of services in rural areas often pushes people to urban centres. Funding pressures are a significant cause of this, with rural areas receiving 65% less funding for homelessness per capita in comparison to their urban counterparts.¹

The shame and stigma associated with homelessness in more affluent or rural areas is a significant barrier to getting support, while the practical constraints of delivering bricks and mortar services in isolated settings reduces the support available to people.

THIS HAS SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES. RURAL HOMELESSNESS IS A HEALTH EMERGENCY.

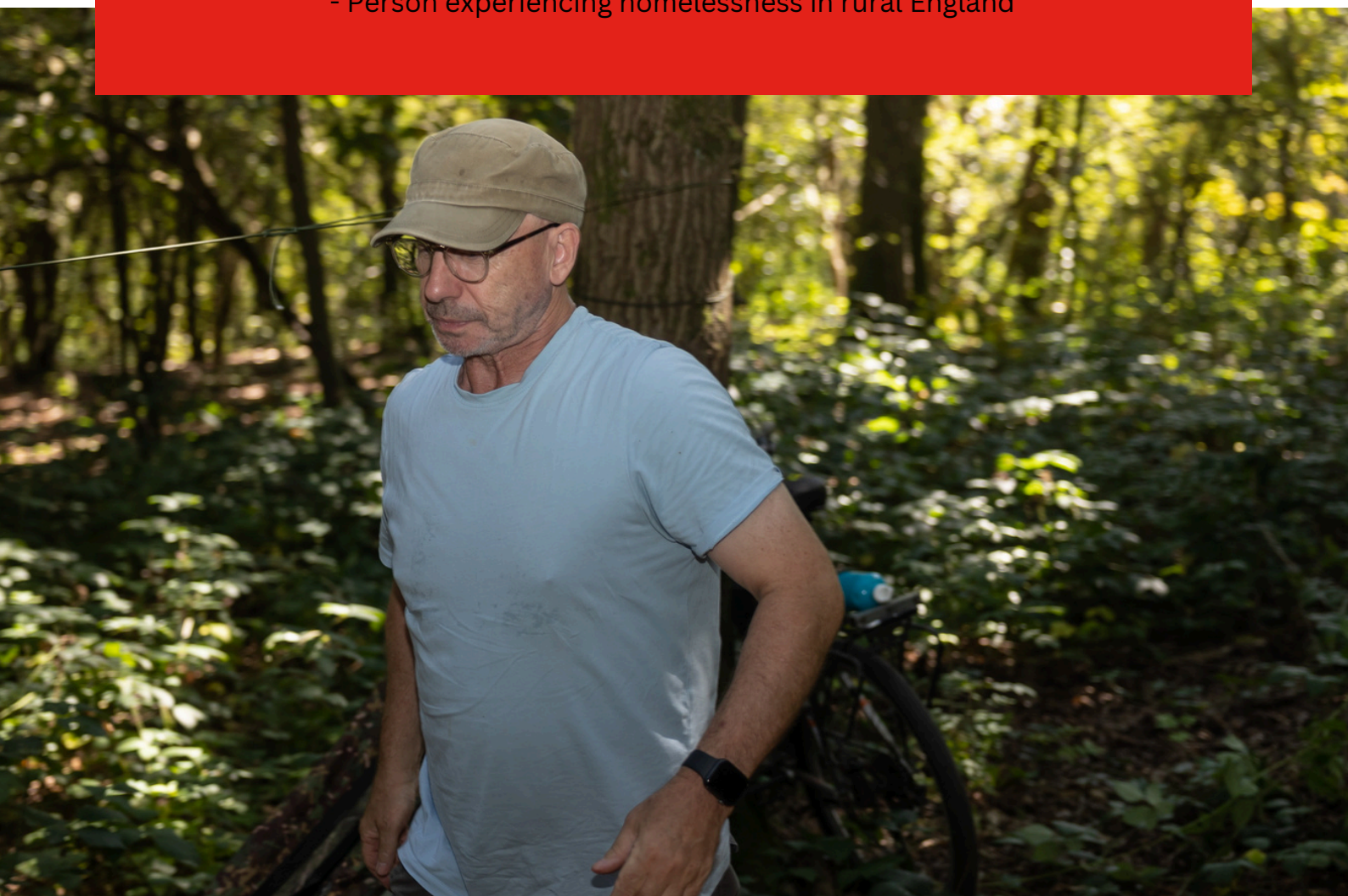
It can lead to significant mental and physical health problems and expose people to violence and abuse. Unaffordability of housing is damaging our communities and pushing out people with strong ties to their areas.

WE MUST ALL PLAY OUR PART SO THAT EVERYONE IN RURAL ENGLAND CAN HAVE A SAFE AND SECURE ROOF OVER THEIR HEAD.

Now is the time for local and national government to step up and ensure that rural homelessness is prevented and tackled wherever it occurs.

“Rural homelessness is by far one of the worst things...Nobody knows you’re there; nobody cares you’re there; you are on your own”

- Person experiencing homelessness in rural England



THE SOLUTION:

A NEW GENERATION OF HOUSING FIRST HOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

We need a solution to rural homelessness which starts with housing and flexible support – now is the time for a new generation of Housing First opportunities across our communities.

A housing-led approach upturns the traditional response to homelessness by removing the conditions normally attached to accessing a home. Instead, a housing-led approach provides people who are experiencing homelessness with stable, appropriate accommodation as a first response, whilst providing ongoing support to maintain accommodation.



“Housing First is an internationally evidenced intervention, which has proven successful in supporting people with multiple and complex needs to maintain housing. The main premise is that an individual should not need to prove they are ready for housing and is instead given a permanent offer of their own home, along with an intensive long-term support package to enable them to maintain it”

– Homeless Link³

HOUSING FIRST IS A TRIED AND TESTED MODEL OF SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE FACING HOMELESSNESS, BUT RURAL AREAS ESPECIALLY STAND TO BENEFIT FROM ITS EXPANSION.

We know Housing First works, particularly for people with multiple and complex needs such as mental ill-health and trauma. However, at present it is an urban intervention, not sufficiently delivered outside of large towns and cities. This is a huge missed opportunity.

Rural areas would particularly benefit from Housing First solutions, because of their isolation and the challenges of delivering bricks and mortar support services. Expecting people in rural areas to travel across their county to access the employment, health, and housing support they need is unrealistic and inefficient. Rural Housing First opportunities can be delivered at scale, providing a collective solution to a shared (but often ignored) problem.



HOUSING FIRST CAN CHANGE LIVES AND STRENGTHEN RURAL COMMUNITIES, AS PROJECTS IN THE UK HAVE ALREADY SHOWN.

In the few instances where Housing First operates in rural settings, it has shown itself to be a gamechanger. Shelter Dorset, who operate Housing First across the region, have described Housing First as ideally placed to respond to rural realities.

Shelter Dorset made several adaptations to their model, including not restricting the service to people with histories of rough sleeping, unlike many Housing First services. Verifying someone as 'rough sleeping' proved practically challenging in remote rural communities, as this typically requires outreach teams to record people as bedded down in person. Instead, Shelter Dorset opted for a broader approach and expanded their criteria to include any history of homelessness (including sofa surfing) along with high support needs. This flexible definition proved more appropriate for rural settings and allowed more women to be supported, as they are more likely to be 'hidden' and less likely to be verified as rough sleeping.

We heard from providers in Dorset that hidden rural homelessness made it particularly important to have strong referral pathways and working arrangements with local statutory services and providers. This includes drug and alcohol services, mental health services, and housing associations - as well as county lines teams, police and probation.

“There is the guy we all worked with who lived in the woods for probably four years. His support network was in the area, including the library he accessed, the food bank. He was priority need. But he didn’t want to go to [urban] Weymouth because that was only temporary accommodation on offer. To move there would put him at more risk. That’s not what he wanted. Once there was an appropriate [rural] property identified with Housing First all those needs were met...without Housing First he would have been in the woods still”

- [Shelter Dorset service manager]

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES HAVE DEMONSTRATED THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOUSING FIRST IN RURAL SETTINGS.

Pathways Vermont in the US have run a Housing First programme since 2009, which was the first of its kind in a rural setting and achieved a housing retention rate of 85%.⁴ The service had to make certain adjustments to reflect rural needs, which included: greater resourcing for landlord liaison functions, and more time allocated to maintaining relationships; as well as flexibility on certain aspects of fidelity to the Housing First model, such as allowing a closer density of Housing First units. Utilising technology, such as Google platforms, shared contact lists and electronic health records also aided them in overcoming geographical challenges.

A Churchill Fellowship report on responses to rural homelessness in the United States found:

“[Housing First] arrangements have facilitated better joined-up service delivery...to work more effectively with people experiencing homelessness. This is particularly important in more rural areas, where there is a particular importance in connecting with people where they are, and not expecting them to come to you – given the challenges of culture and geography.”⁵



SCOPING THE FEASIBILITY OF RURAL HOUSING FIRST IN EAST KENT

As part of this review, English Rural and Porchlight considered the case for delivering Housing First in a specific locality in East Kent. The local authority areas within scope of this feasibility study were Ashford, Dover, Folkestone and Hythe, Swale, and Canterbury.

Key findings included:

East Kent has concentrations of deprivation, homelessness, and unaffordability pressures. Per capita rough sleeping in these areas is slightly above the national average. There appears to be an overrepresentation of ‘intentional homelessness’ as a cited cause of a main duty no longer being owed by boroughs.

People experiencing homelessness in East Kent would benefit from more rural housing and services offers. People experiencing rural homelessness want to stay close to existing rural support networks to assist with their recovery, and/or want to avoid negative support networks and unsafe environments in more urban areas. Both suggest the important role of specialist and flexible provision in rural areas – which is rarely a feasible option for people with the highest needs (e.g. ill-health, substance use, complex trauma).

There is a specific challenge of people who are owed a housing duty from their council and are in temporary accommodation, but for various reasons do not sustain the tenancy (this puts people at risk of 'intentional homelessness').

This puts this cohort at risk of rough sleeping, which can increase the harm they experience, worsen their conditions, and increase costs to other local services. Intensive support in rural settings can help to remove people from unsafe environments or keep them closer to supportive networks.

English Rural and Porchlight identified a Housing First service operating across East Kent as an important solution to some of these challenges.

Our research identified a role for an 'upstream' Housing First provision for individuals with high levels of vulnerability and for whom other services would be inaccessible. This kind of provision would prevent individuals from being found intentionally homeless and avoid an escalation of needs associated with rough sleeping.

There are sufficient social homes in rural communities to make the service a success:

To be feasible, we identified the need for a service with 8-12 one/two-bedroom homes in rural areas of East Kent. English Rural could provide four suitable void properties, with the remainder being provided by local authorities or equivalent partners. This service will provide expanded options for people for whom housing in towns is unsafe or risky.

Two support workers would be required to provide intensive support:

This model would require two Porchlight support workers plus a part-time (0.6 FTE) Housing First Coordinator to adequately serve 8-12 homes. Experience from previous Housing First projects shows the risks of relying on a single worker. These risks include no cover during short-term absences when clients need stability, and significant service disruption during any long-term absence.

In this internal feasibility study, partners concluded that with sufficient resource a service with these components would be feasible and support the outcome of tackling homelessness for people with the highest needs in East Kent.

This would be achieved by providing options outside of the towns and cities which will not be appropriate for many people experiencing homelessness.





RECOMMENDATIONS:

HOW TO SUPPORT DELIVERY OF FLEXIBLE SERVICES TAILORED TO RURAL REALITIES

Housing First has the flexibility to deliver for rural areas, in a way that inflexible bricks and mortar support services and temporary accommodation does not. The more 'hidden' nature of rural homelessness, and the lack of support available through temporary accommodation, creates a void for supportive housing-based solutions in villages and small towns. Local and national government have a unique opportunity to build on existing good practice to target this intervention in rural communities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

MHCLG invest in a new tranche of Housing First, with a programme to scale up and support delivery in rural communities in partnership with DEFRA. These services should provide multidisciplinary support across a breadth of areas, to support mental health, substance use, and housing casework, combined with an established fund to cover the higher transport costs and physical isolation in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

A commitment to deliver genuinely affordable homes in rural communities, through scaling up Rural Exception Sites, dedicated investment via the Homes England Affordable Homes Programme and ongoing financial support for Rural Housing Enablers to provide the pipeline of new genuinely affordable housing rural communities need.

REFERENCES

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