

# Shapps: Rough sleeping count masks real scale of the problem

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– as PM gives Ministers in eight Government departments responsibility for homeless

Housing Minister Grant Shapps has today removed the mask on the true scale of the problem of rough sleeping, with plans to overhaul the flawed system for measuring homelessness. This comes on the day of the first meeting of homelessness ministers from eight Government departments set up by the Prime Minister to step up action to help the homeless.

The latest rough sleeping count conducted in 2009 showed there were only 464 rough sleepers nationwide.

However, up until 2008, the majority of the estimates that councils submitted were bracketed down to zero, masking the true number of rough sleepers nationwide. The current system also means that local authorities only have to conduct a count where there is thought to be a significant problem - meaning that only 76 out of the then 354 councils contributed to the last count.

So today, the Minister confirmed that he is looking for the system to be overhauled, and so is asking officials to review the way rough sleepers are counted so the findings better reflect the true scale of the problem. Any agreed changes will come into effect from 2011 and, as pre-announced, this year's rough sleeping figure will be published as soon as possible.

Today, a new ministerial taskforce met for the first time to discuss how best to tackle head-on the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping.

The Prime Minister has agreed a cross-department approach and so today, for the first time, ministers from eight different Government departments across Whitehall will work together to see how the policies for which they have responsibility can help address the complex problems that cause people to lose their home.

Mr Shapps said:

"Councils and charities are doing a great job in helping people off the streets, but the current counting system makes a mockery of the scale of the problem they face.

"This Coalition Government will not stick our heads in the sand and ignore the true picture of the number of those facing life on the streets. That's why I am announcing today that we will overhaul the Rough Sleeping Count from 2011 so that it is a credible measure and reflects the reality of the situation.

"And for the first time, Ministers from across eight Government departments are coming together to ensure that the needs of the homeless are being met, not just in terms of housing, but in employment, training, rehabilitation and healthcare."

And as part of the new Government's drive to address homelessness head-on, this new taskforce will look at areas such as better health outcomes for homeless people, through closer working between local authorities, hospitals and primary care services and the reduction of homelessness amongst ex-offenders, which is linked with re-offending in many cases.

The Ministers in the new Homelessness Working Group are:

- Grant Shapps MP (Con) - Department for Communities and Local Government (housing and homelessness) (Chair)
- Andrew Robathan MP (Con) - Ministry of Defence (welfare of veterans)
- John Hayes MP (Con) - Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (adult skills)
- Paul Burstow MP (LD) - Department of Health (health and care services)
- Lord David Freud (Con) - Department for Work and Pensions (housing benefit)
- Crispin Blunt MP (Con) - Ministry of Justice (criminal justice)
- James Brokenshire (Con) - Home Office (crime prevention)
- Tim Loughton MP (Con) - Department for Education (children and youth services)

Councils and the voluntary sector play an important part tackling homelessness and getting people off the street. Many charities also help carry out the current rough sleeping count and the new Housing Minister is keen for them and local authorities to take part in the upcoming consultation, so that everyone can have confidence in the new counting method.