



Spotlight report: Living in the shadows – homelessness in Rotherham

February 2025

healthwatch
Rotherham

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About us

Healthwatch Rotherham is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Rotherham. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We focus on ensuring that people's worries and concerns about current services are addressed and work to get services right for the future.

Introduction:

Adequate housing is a basic human need, but with homelessness increasing throughout England, more people than ever are facing difficulties.

When people think about homelessness, they generally think about people living on the streets and sleeping rough. However, homelessness also includes those who don't have a permanent place to live. Some examples of homelessness include:

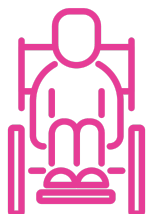
- **Rooflessness** – those who don't have a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough
- **Houselessness** – those who only have a temporary place to sleep for example in an institution or shelter
- **Living in insecure housing** – sometimes known as hidden homeless. This includes those:
 - living in insecure rented houses,
 - under the risk of eviction,
 - staying with family and friends (also known as. 'sofa surfing')
- **Living in inadequate housing** – those living in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, or in extreme overcrowding

Research for the homeless charity Crisis suggests that factors such as the cost of living increases, rising private rents and evictions, and limited social renting means that homelessness is only likely to increase over the next few years.

From **April – June 2024**, local authorities across England, assessed 90,990 households as homeless or at risk of homelessness, up from 73,660 for the same period in the previous year. The **annual rough sleeping snapshot for 2023** found 3,898 people were sleeping rough in England, compared to 3,069 people in 2022.

In Yorkshire and the Humber, the rough sleeping figures have increased dramatically from 170 in 2022, to 270 in 2023. Rotherham has also reported 7 rough sleepers which is the highest number since 2019. In 2022, Rotherham's figure was 0.

People who experience homelessness face poorer health compared to the general population. In [The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report](#), data collected between 2018–2021 showed for those experiencing homelessness:



78% have a diagnosed physical health condition



82% have a diagnosed mental health condition

According to the [2021 Census](#), only 5.3% of the general population of England said their general health was bad or very bad, compared to [63% of homeless people](#), as stated by Homeless Link.

The health inequalities faced by those experiencing homelessness, are also far greater than those faced by the general population, as they encounter poorer diagnoses and considerable barriers to accessing services and support.

However, the healthcare experiences of those facing homelessness are seldom heard and having established relationships with local homeless support groups, we wanted to amplify the voices of this group to highlight the challenges they face to those in charge of services.

Over a period of **8 months**, we spoke to **26 people**. We also carried out an in depth interview with one individual which has provided even greater insight into the struggles faced. From our engagements with these individuals, we have identified **4** key themes.

Mental health issues

Poor mental health can be both the cause and result of homelessness. Housing insecurity, homelessness and uncertainty can be extremely stressful and can both create, and make existing mental health issues worse.

In [The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report](#):

- **3 out of 4** respondents reported having had a pre-existing mental health condition prior to being made homeless
- **82%** reported having a mental health diagnosis

The report shows a huge overall increase in people reporting mental health problems, the most common of which were:

- **72%** with depression
- **60%** with anxiety
- **1 in 4** with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

We heard many stories from those we spoke to who were struggling to cope with poor mental health.

Some recognised that their mental health was suffering but they were unsure where they could turn to in order to access support.



My mental health isn't good at all and I don't know how or where to get help





...There's barriers to everything for someone like me! My head is all over the place! I could do with some mental health support, I want face to face but don't know where to start looking...



Whereas others told us that they hadn't been offered any support or the support that was offered was impossible to access due to location or availability.



I have mental health issues and a diagnosis of schizophrenia. I don't have faith in the NHS at all...I don't have any mental health support and I get lonely



...My mental health is bad, I don't get any help and I can't drive and don't have money to get to town [to get to mental health support]. My dog helps with my depression and if I didn't have him, I'd probably top myself, he keeps me going cos no one else is bothered...



Problems with physical health

Those experiencing homelessness are more likely to have a long-term health condition, with **63%** of those who responded to [The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report](#) reporting having a long-term health condition, disability or infirmity, compared to **22%** of the general population.

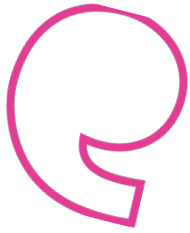
The most common physical health issues reported in [research by Groundswell](#) were:

- **joint, bone and muscle problems (40%)**
- **blood conditions (26%)**
- **problems with feet (21%)**
- **stomach issues (19%)**

Groundswell found that the living conditions people found themselves in often made existing conditions worse and the stress they were under contributed to further conditions such as headaches, hair loss, panic attacks and chest pain.

Furthermore, a lack of access to healthcare services means that health conditions may be left untreated or poorly managed, resulting in conditions getting worse. Traditional ways of offering screening or follow up appointments by post, means those without a permanent address are at risk of missing appointments resulting in missed diagnosis opportunities and unfinished treatments.

We heard through our engagements how even when people had taken action to seek help, some felt healthcare staff were uncaring and didn't try to help them with their problems.



I'm worried about my memory and I also don't sleep well. They don't listen to me at the GP's, it's a waste of time me going. I went recently about my sleep and the doctor just said "well we don't prescribe sleeping tablets unless it's absolutely necessary" They just don't seem to care...



We also heard how healthcare staff had failed to explain properly to people about their conditions and medication. This was especially concerning given the seriousness of some of the conditions that we were told about. A lack of information means it is difficult for people to manage their conditions, realise the importance of the medication that they have been prescribed or know what warning signs to look out for that may mean they need further help.



I've found out I've had several strokes. I had no idea. I'm on meds but I don't know why or what they're meant to do to help me...



NHS staff don't care about me, they're not bothered. I've been told I have a brain tumour and that's it. I don't know what's happening next or if it's serious!...



Furthermore, we heard how existing health conditions were not monitored as would be expected. This also raises the risk of health conditions reaching crisis point before treatment is sought.



NHS is crap. No one does anything to help me. I have a lung condition but no one is keeping an eye on it...



...[I've had] a heart attack. I haven't had any regular checks since the heart attack or any advice on how to look after myself



One of the most common problems we heard over the last 8 months is about the lack of access to dental treatment. Whilst this is an issue faced by the general population as well, we know the oral health of those experiencing homelessness is much worse. [**Research by the homelessness charity Groundswell**](#) shows that of those who took part in their study:

- **90% have had issues with their mouth since becoming homeless**
- **60% have had pain from their mouths since being homeless**
- **70% had lost teeth since they had become homeless**

[**The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report**](#) also identifies dental problems as one of the most common physical health conditions faced by those experiencing homelessness.

Following on from successful pilots across other South Yorkshire areas, Rotherham has been working on a project to improve dental access to those who are homeless and aren't currently registered with an NHS dentist. Those falling into this category can be referred by any services to the 'homeless friendly' dental practitioners signed up to the scheme to help improve the oral health of those experiencing homelessness.

Addiction and attitudes

Drug and alcohol addiction are often involved in the cycle of homelessness. Those struggling with addictions may find it hard to hold down secure employment and housing. Those experiencing homelessness may turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism and a form of self medication to deal with their situation. Rates of drug and alcohol use are **4 times higher** amongst homeless people than in the general population. Not only is this cycle difficult to break, but drugs and alcohol also have a huge impact on health.


In **The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report**:

- **45%** reported they were self-medicating with drugs or alcohol to help them cope with their mental health
- **54%** reported that they had used drugs in the 12 month prior to taking part in the research
- **38%** reported they had, or were recovering from, a drug problem
- **29%** reported they had, or were recovering from, an alcohol problem


Those that take positive steps to give up their reliance on drugs or alcohol, can face additional barriers. Many people experiencing homelessness **feel judged** when they reach out for help to health professionals, especially when they are struggling with mental health problems and addictions.

We heard from one person who had been struggling with addiction as well as poor mental health who reported having been transferred from his own GP surgery to another without having been told why.


Even when we were told that health provision was good, it was still highlighted that it is not the case for everyone.




Although I get good care from my GP and other people in health, I know there are others that don't. If your situation is like ours and you have addictions and mental health issues, you can feel that people look down on you and speak to you in a way that is quite patronising



As well as facing discriminatory attitudes, a lack of a permanent address means appointment letters may not reach people and they may miss crucial appointments for their recovery. This also causes extra stress due to the fear of losing the support that has been offered because they may be seen as not engaging with the services.



I have missed my first appointment with...ROADS [Rotherham Alcohol and Drug Service]. I'm worried I've been struck off the list for support



The judgement faced by those experiencing homelessness extends beyond healthcare professionals directly involved in treatment. We heard from one person who was accused of theft in a local pharmacy that they felt wouldn't have happened to someone who wasn't in their position.



I was in a pharmacy in Rotherham collecting my prescription not so long ago and while I was waiting I tried on some reading glasses. I had taken my glasses off - by mistake I'd put my readers back on the stand, they were very similar and the pharmacy staff called the police, when this was just a mistake. I feel like I was treated differently to if it had been someone else



Apart from the injustice, this has further implications as it may well put people off seeking help or getting the medication they need in order to stay well.

With [The Unhealthy State of Homelessness 2022 report](#) identifying that **71%** of those they spoke to currently take some form of prescribed medication, the importance of people feeling welcome, and pharmacies being a safe space to go to, cannot be underestimated.

Access to healthcare and digital exclusion

A lack of access to healthcare along with a lack of money poses serious consequences for health. With the move towards making a lot of healthcare processes digital, those who don't have reliable internet access are at risk of being excluded from healthcare services.

Research carried out by [People Know How](#) found that those experiencing homelessness are less likely to have access to the internet due to prohibitive costs and restricted availability in public places.

Additionally, whilst many people experiencing homelessness have mobile phones, being unable to charge them, not being able to afford mobile phone contracts and the risk of getting them broken or stolen, means that they are not a reliable way for people to be able to make appointments or get information about their healthcare. The waiting times often experienced on phone calls mean that many cannot afford to wait to get their call answered and go without medical advice.



I can't get an appointment at my GP surgery. I can't get through on the phone and when I call in person they tell me to call on the phone between certain hours...



Case study: Michael's story

*name changed

We spoke to Michael*, a British citizen in his forties, about his healthcare journey and the challenges he's faced as someone experiencing homelessness. This is his story.

"I've been in Rotherham for a few months now and I'm homeless. I was made homeless when I was in hospital due to a fall as I wasn't able to pay my rent on my temporary accommodation.

I was in hospital for a few weeks and was placed on an orthopaedic ward which was tough and I didn't feel like I belonged there as everyone was old and some had dementia/alzheimers. Staff were surprised that I was in there for some time...even older people were having hip replacements and were in and out before I was.



The meals were good...and I feel this is really important when you're ill and not feeling great. Food can make all the difference



When it finally came to my discharge, the doctor said I was fit to leave, but I had no home to go to and no clothes. My elderly mum came and brought me some clothes and the hospital put me and her in a taxi with a load of shrapnel and sent me off to the council building in Worksop. They offered me nothing and told me that they would need to pick me up off the street first before I was classed as being homeless. I didn't want to risk being out through the night,

waiting for them to pick me up to be able to house me! Instead I took it upon myself to try and find a roof over my head and I came across Lighthouse in Rotherham.

I am supposed to be having a bone scan following my fall. This was arranged and apparently I've missed 2 appointments for it but they had sent my appointments to my previous address.



How come they can call you up to tell you you've missed appointments but they can't call you to tell you when an appointment has been made? There can't just be me in this situation!



Since my fall and having injured my hip badly, I've had no follow-up calls or appointments offered to check on my recovery.

I have 2 crutches to use at the minute and the stoppers at the bottom were wearing thin and when I asked about getting new ones I was told I had to pay £5.00 for each stopper. I went to the GP reception and she said she had some replacements! No charge!

I'm registered with [a GP] but I'm not happy with the care I'm receiving. I was asked many questions by reception staff about my health and suggestions were made about what was wrong with me, but the suggestions seemed so

random and not connected with anything that's going on with me, I just wanted an appointment to discuss what could be wrong and felt I was fighting to get this!

The GP also doesn't seem to want to keep me on my prescription...which I've been taking for years, but she didn't explain why, so I spoke with the receptionist who looked at my records and said it was on as a repeat prescription and she would organise for it to be issued from the chemist. I got much more sense and answers from the reception staff when it came to my meds.



Communication needs to be better and people explaining their reasons for decisions



I do have mental issues too... and I'm on very strong medication for this, which really does help me. It really regulates my emotions which I need, but I went around in circles before I was diagnosed.

I was on a mental health ward in hospital who discharged my care back to my GP who then saw me and said I needed treating back at the hospital so I was backwards and forwards not knowing what was or should be happening with my mental health treatment.

I really feel like I fight to get the care and medication I need but some people can just go in daily for their methadone and it doesn't seem a problem!"

We had further contact with Michael following our conversation, supporting him as he waited for surgery. He was keen to provide us with further insight following his operation – this is what he told us:

“I've now had my hip operation in Rotherham which has gone fine. However, staff attitudes differ so much. At one point ...I was really thirsty, so I asked for a drink, to be told "We're too busy", yet another member of staff joked with me about drinks when I asked if I could have a specific drink... but offered to go and have a go at making it for me”



How you're treated and spoken to in hospital, when some people feel very vulnerable, can make such a difference to how you feel



Rotherham's response to homelessness

In Rotherham, there has been a significant increase in homelessness since 2021. This is in line with the rest of the country and is partly due to the cost of living crisis and a lack of affordable decent housing. Between April and September 2023, there were **699 people who presented themselves as homeless** in Rotherham, with 396 of those placed in temporary accommodation.

From consulting with those with lived experience of homelessness, Rotherham council has developed a **Homeless Prevention and Rough Sleepers Strategy** which aims to:

- work in partnership to end homelessness in Rotherham
- ensure everyone has a secure affordable place to call home
- make sure the right support at the right time is in place to prevent homelessness and enable recovery

The strategy sets out **6 key aims**:

- 1.** Make homelessness a rare occurrence by focusing on prevention and early intervention
- 2.** Minimise the use and improve the quality of temporary accommodation
- 3.** Increase access to affordable housing options
- 4.** Improve access to housing support, employment and health services
- 5.** Support people with complex needs
- 6.** End rough sleeping in Rotherham

The most common reason why people in Rotherham become homeless is due to family and friends being 'no longer willing/able to accommodate' them. This accounted for **32% of all cases** received between April and September 2023. The council is working to prevent this by providing advice early on to avoid family problems that can lead to homelessness.

13.1% of all homelessness cases in Rotherham are due to the end of a private tenancy, with 8% of these due to the landlord selling their property. As the second highest reason for homelessness in Rotherham, the council works with households to seek advice and help early on and the council's Homelessness Team helps to negotiate with landlords, trying to find solutions to prevent tenancies ending. Where this is not possible, they work to develop a housing plan to support a planned move.

Where homelessness cannot be prevented, the council is committed to ending rough sleeping in Rotherham. In 2019, there were 16 rough sleepers reported in the town but by November 2022, this number had been reduced to 0. Unfortunately, in line with the rest of England, this number has increased again in 2023 and now stands at 7. Those **rough sleeping in Rotherham** are predominantly male, over the age of 26 and British citizens.

An 8 bedroom supported housing emergency accommodation hub has been set up to help get people off the streets quickly and regular rough sleeper counts are carried out, responding to the needs of all those they make contact with. Outreach advice services are provided via a community drop in at Shiloh, a local homeless charity.

Rotherham council have also worked to improve access to information and to provide more help and advice to prevent homelessness. As part of this aim, they have published a handbook information booklet called **H.O.M.E (Helping Others Made Easy)**.

Conclusions

Homelessness can have a huge impact on individuals' health and wellbeing and it is only by understanding this better, that people will be able to get the support and access the services that they need.

Access to appropriate and timely treatments plays an important part in helping people move away from homelessness and whilst action is being taken in Rotherham to try to tackle the issues faced by those at risk of, and experiencing homelessness, more clearly still needs to be done. Attitudes towards those experiencing homelessness continue to impact on the care people feel they receive. Although there are some fantastic support services out there, the stigma felt around homelessness and the judgement felt by those seeking help, can prevent them from getting the help that they need when they are at their most vulnerable.

Services need to make sure that they consider people's circumstances when dealing with their health issues to ensure that everyone has access to the support they need, whether it be initial or follow up appointments, screening services or just advice and information. The lack of an address, mobile phone, internet access or transport should not exclude anyone from accessing healthcare.

The dental pilot scheme is a great example of how partners can work together to improve the health of those experiencing homelessness, and it is this joined up working, along with listening to what those with lived experience actually need, that will make a difference to people's lives.

Local support available

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The council is the first place to turn to if you are at risk of homelessness or are already homeless. They offer support, preventative action and can provide emergency or temporary housing depending on your situation. The council offers free advice and can help create a Personal Housing Plan in order to get you back in appropriate housing.

Call: 01709 336009

Online form: <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/xfp/form/1303>

Website: <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/homelessness/council-can-help/3>

Citizens Advice

A great place to turn to to get support filling in homeless applications and challenging homeless decisions from the council as well as giving advice if you weren't offered housing from the council. Citizens Advice can also provide financial advice about what benefits you may be eligible for and concerns over debts and housing and legal advice such as going to court for rent arrears and eviction notices and advice on issues over discrimination, as well as signposting you to helpful services and support groups.

Call: 0808 278 7911

Website: <https://www.citizensadvicerotherham.org.uk/>

Drop in service: Every Thursday 9.30–12.30 at 2 Upper Millgate, Rotherham, S60 1PF

Lighthouse Homes

Offers immediate medium to long term accommodation for men and women who are homeless as well as free food in their Sunday Night Cafe.

Call: 01709 364600 or 01709 374059

Website: <https://lighthousehomes.co.uk/>

Email: info@lighthousehomes.co.uk

Address: 71 Westgate, Rotherham, S60 1BQ (open Mon–Fri, 9am to 5pm)

Shiloh Rotherham

Shiloh is a charity organisation that offers support to adults who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. They offer housing advice, education & training, creative activities and support for health and addictions. They also offer practical support, including free hot food, and drop in sessions to help provide further advice.

Call: 01709 559504

Website: <https://www.shilohrotherham.org.uk/>

Address: 15 Station Road, Rotherham, S60 1HN (open Mon–Fri 8.30am to 4.30pm)

Action Housing

Action Housing is a charity and registered social landlord. They provide safe, secure, good quality accommodation. Their support services help people grow their independent living skills, keep their home and reduce the risk of facing homelessness again.

Call: 03000 230800

Email: info@actionorg.uk

Website: <https://actionorg.uk/>

Address: 6 Genesis Park, Sheffield Road, Rotherham, S60 1DX

National support available

Streetlink

Connects people sleeping rough to local services

Website: <https://thestreetlink.org.uk/>

Crisis

Provides advice and support to those who are homeless or will help refer you to the right service.

Website: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/>

Shelter

Provides help for those with housing issues or experiencing homelessness.

Website: <https://england.shelter.org.uk/>

Centrepoint

A youth homelessness charity providing support to young people aged 16–25 or their friends and family over email, chat and phone.

Call: 0808 8000661

Webform: <https://centrepoint.org.uk/contact-help>

Website: <https://centrepoint.org.uk/>

Acknowledgments

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**Committed
to quality**

We are committed to the quality of our information. Every three years we perform an in depth audit so that we can be certain of this.