Dying Homeless Project

Temporary memorial installed on Nelson’s Column
February 2020
Photocredit: Anthony Luvera
Overview

The Dying Homeless Project, which was set up by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in October 2017 and taken on by Museum of Homelessness in April 2019, aims to document and remember every person who dies whilst homeless in the United Kingdom. We remember people on an online memorial page and we hold local and national events to commemorate people who have died. We have previously published findings in August 2019, March 2020 and in February 2021. Since the project began in October 2017, we have documented the deaths of 3834 people on our memorial. These findings and analysis are correct as at 17th March 2022. The project is not static and the data is constantly evolving as new findings come in via the Coroner’s system, late FOIs or other research routes.
The Dying Homeless Project collects information year-round; this can come from interested members of the public, grassroots groups, homelessness sector workers, and via public reporting. A significant proportion of the data comes from official sources via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. The definition of homelessness is people who are sleeping rough, living in emergency or temporary accommodation such as hostels or B&Bs, living in supported housing for people who are homeless, sofa surfing or squatting. We include all people who do not have a settled home, regardless of immigration status.

Prior to 2020, both the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and MoH had experienced difficulty in securing, under FOI, data relating to how local councils record and account for people who have died whilst homeless. However, this is the second year when we have amended our FOI requests and had additional resources to support this data collection. The result is a more comprehensive set of data than before.
We gather information from news reports, local networks and also cross-reference names that are remembered at homelessness memorial services with FOI data. We use these methods to try and capture people who might not be recorded under official sources.

Information on people's deaths is sourced from news reporting and information from grassroots groups, the sector and the public. In addition, we have developed the Dying Homeless Project coalition - a group of people who meet regularly to plan the direction of the project. Coalition members include people from around the UK, including people affected by homelessness and people who work in services. They feed into the project providing vital advice, direction and information in relation to finding out about the deaths of homeless people.

We have strict and rigorous verification processes and if we are in any doubt, we will remove a record from the data.

Freedom of Information Requests

Of the 1286 people identified this year, 1162 of those people were shared with us under Freedom of Information requests.
1. Rights under GDPR and UK data protection law apply only to living persons. Therefore, on a legal basis MoH does not need to consider deceased individual’s data protection rights nor do we have obligations under GDPR towards that person.

2. However, a duty of confidentiality may be owed to the deceased individual (and their relatives) in respect to information where there was a reasonable expectation of confidentiality.

3. Our blanket approach is therefore only to share information that would be available via public record. For example, details from a death certificate or a coroner’s inquest.

4. However, our main consideration in publicly sharing findings relating to someone who has died homeless is that publications by MoH do not wherever possible cause distress or harm to friends, family and people who knew the person.
5. MoH will not process sensitive information related to individuals, such as medical records or case notes. We note that representatives of deceased people have the right to request a legal duty of confidentiality around such information.

6. In respect of homelessness services and agencies, we will not name individuals or organisations that report in to us and will make every effort to respect the professional integrity of organisations working in the field wherever possible.

7. We operate the ‘power of veto’ where if a relative of a deceased person contacts us and requests information to be removed from the site, we will do so.

Where a death is reported via the website or other less formal means, we have a strict verification process working with local authorities or local services. We also try and ensure that family have been informed prior to publication.

It is our policy not to share on social media or elsewhere reports of any particular death until we have completed our verification process.
Summary findings

This year we have collected information on 1286 deaths in 2021 of people experiencing homelessness. Last year we reported 976 deaths, and we reported 710 deaths in 2019. We remember everyone who lost their lives in 2021 with love and dignity. This report represents our findings, and our attempts to galvanise action to prevent future losses of life.

The pandemic continued to dominate 2021, with further lockdowns in the UK. We know now that Everyone In did not represent everyone, and did not represent long term, safe accommodation for the people it did support. We are appalled to have to publish the same recommendations again this year. We will continue to demand change until it comes.

The total number of deaths reported is likely to be higher than our figures suggest as several local authorities did not respond to our FOI requests. For example, we have no data for Birmingham, the UK’s second largest city. Additionally, not all councils provided all the types of information requested. For example, some just gave us a number of deaths but no further details. Therefore, the detailed information related to specific themes (e.g., age, causes) is based on a proportion which we detail where appropriate.
Our data is published ahead of the official ONS figures on the deaths of people who are homeless. In 2020, the ONS verified 490 real and actual deaths and used this figure to estimate that 688 people had died nationwide. In 2021, we have verified 1286 real and actual deaths in England and Wales, an increase on both our own figures from the previous year, and the ONS figures. Last year, the ONS publicly stated that it was difficult to gather data because of the Everyone In scheme. This is because the postcode database used has regular homelessness accommodation addresses on it, but people were staying in new and varied forms of accommodation due to Everyone In.

It is important to note that our methodologies are different: We nurture relationships with bereaved families, friends and the grassroots community so that we can remember people who died in a wide variety of insecure situations that may not always be captured by official statistics. In addition we use FOIs to councils rather than drawing on death certificates. Our project is live and updated throughout the year.
Picture across the UK

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland

Bar chart showing data for 2020 and 2021.
Picture across the UK

Local authority areas with the highest number of deaths

Glasgow
Bristol
Westminster
Edinburgh
Enfield
Southampton
Newcastle
Cardiff
Bedford
Manchester
Stoke
Tower Hamlets
Type of situation (accommodation or streets)

- Temp Acc: 25.9%
- Supported acc: 15.6%
- Rough sleepers accom: 13.8%
- Street homeless: 5.3%
- Hotel: 0.5%
- Emergency Accom: 1.6%
- Unknown: 33.3%
- B&B: 4%
This graph shows the numbers of people who died in each month. We can see here the pattern of deaths actually shows higher numbers of deaths in the summer, contrary to common beliefs that many people die in the winter months.

People who are living in emergency and insecure forms of housing are at risk all year around. Poor quality of temporary accommodation that often features mould and damp, risks to physical health and the loneliness that can be a key factor when people are accommodated must not be forgotten.
Selected causation information. Causation data is only a snapshot, consisting of 253 people out of 1286.

Of the 253 instances where we know a cause of death, 41% (103) of these were suspected drug and alcohol related or overdoses. The particular areas that had high numbers of drug and alcohol related deaths were:

- South Lanarkshire
- Exeter
- Southampton
- Sheffield
- Stirling, Hull, Leeds

Most drug-related deaths took place in some form of accommodation:

- temporary accommodation (36)
- hostels and accommodation for rough sleepers (23)
- supported accommodation (22)
- B&Bs, hotels, and emergency accommodation (11)

Only 9 drug-related deaths took place while the person had no fixed abode and was sleeping rough or sofa surfing.
People completing suicide

Of the 253 instances where we know a cause of death, 12% (31) of people died by suicide.

The areas with the highest number of people who died by suicide were Newport and Westminster, where there were 3 deaths by suicide in each.

Most suicides were completed in some form of accommodation:

● temporary accommodation (10)
● hostels and accommodation for rough sleepers (8)
● supported accommodation (8)
● B&Bs, hotels, and emergency accommodation (4)

Only 1 suicide was completed while the person had no fixed abode and was sleeping rough or sofa surfing.

It is important to note the high level of risk that people face experiencing homelessness face with regards to suicide. A recent study by Culatto et al (2021) found that homeless patients who died by suicide were more likely to die as in-patients than non-homeless people, or to die within 3 months of discharge than non-homeless patients. Additionally, they were more likely to be in contact with drug and alcohol services.

We note that most of these deaths are taking place when people are accommodated, but these forms of accommodation may involve very little or no support, with staff who have little or no training about drug and alcohol awareness or trauma-informed care. This can leave people lonely and isolated, and it simply is not enough to say that someone is accommodated and leave them without support.

If you are reading this and finding life difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on 116 123, email them at jo@samaritans.org, or visit www.samaritans.org to find your nearest branch.
It is striking to us that this is a very binary representation of gender. Only one person is recorded in our memorial as being a trans woman. This was from a memorial submitted to us by a community member who knew her well, which reflects the importance of trusting relationships when disclosing gender identity in a society where levels of transphobia are still high. Nearly one in five LGBT people (18%) including 25% of trans people and 28% of LGBT disabled people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives[1].

While some recording systems (such as H-CLIC and CHAIN) include options for trans and non-binary genders, we know that disclosing gender identity is a risky and dangerous process, particularly in organisational cultures that are not actively working to show that trans and non-binary people are safe within their services. It is likely that people of different genders are within this data but are not represented accurately. We urge policy makers to fund specialist organisations such as The Outside Project and for mainstream organisations to take a proactive approach to welcoming trans and non-binary people within their services and tackling transphobia.

The Dying Homeless Project has been developing year on year, and will continue to do so.

Areas that we are actively working to explore further are gender and immigration status, as we know that discrimination based on gender identity, sexuality, nationality and ethnicity is far too common and puts people experiencing homelessness at risk.

We publish our findings with heavy hearts but in the hope that these findings can be used to spark change. We are appalled to publish the same recommendations as 2020, we have not seen much progress at all.

MoH welcomes the opportunity to work collaboratively to save lives; the number of lives at stake is too big for any one organisation to tackle alone. We welcome conversations with stakeholders and authorities who would like to work with us to provide information for our ongoing project, and to discuss our recommendations to explore how we can work together to shape future approaches to preventing unnecessary deaths.
Our other activity

The Dying Homeless Coalition

The Dying Homeless Coalition was established in 2019 as a way to bring together a wide range of people, including those who have experienced homelessness, activists and artists, those working or volunteering with people experiencing homelessness in many different capacities, and others who care about the issue of homeless deaths.

In 2020, the Dying Homeless Coalition called for a National Confidential Inquiry to be held in response to the high numbers of people dying while homeless. We still believe that this is required and we will continue seeking resources to campaign for justice. We are interested to hear from anyone with feedback on any of the issues outlined in this report from our findings, including additional information on deaths in your area, or discussions about steps being taken in your area to address any of these issues. You can also register your interest in joining the Coalition by emailing miranda@museumofhomelessness.org

If you have experienced a bereavement of someone who was homeless, we run regular Death Café sessions as an open space for discussing and processing issues relating to death and bereavement. Check our website for the next date: www.museumofhomelessness.org
Recommendations

Structural change

National confidential enquiry on homeless deaths

Mandatory fatality reviews for all local authorities, with mechanisms for accountability around applying lessons learned.

Temporary memorial installed at St Martin-in-the-Fields
February 2020
Photocredit: Anthony Luvera
Recommendations

Housing

Urgent attention to increasing council housing stock. We agree with recommendations for changes in planning, land availability, housing benefit, Right to Buy reform and expenditure made by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, (published on 27 July 2020) The work has been done, the evidence is available, but action is needed.

Reform and regulate temporary accommodation provision including that provision held by both companies and charities.

Temporary memorial installed at St Martin-in-the-Fields
February 2020
Photocredit: Anthony Luvera
Recommendations

Care

Recognise that a roof is not enough. People need relationship, meaning and purpose. Design solutions with this in mind.

Pilot harm reduction spaces

Adequately fund and significantly improve access to mental health and substance misuse services

Implement a genuine trauma informed approach to supporting people across services.

Improve communication between health, social care and housing services.

Temporary memorial installed at St Martin-in-the-Fields
February 2020
Photocredit: Anthony Luvera
Recognise that a roof is not enough. People need relationship, meaning and purpose. Design solutions with this in mind.

Pilot harm reduction spaces
Adequately fund and significantly improve access to mental health and substance misuse services
Implement a genuine trauma informed approach to supporting people across services.
Improve communication between health, social care and housing services

May they all Rest in Peace

Visit our online memorial at:
Dying Homeless
(museumofhomelessness.org)

Research and report by Miranda Keast, Matt Turtle and Jess Turtle.

Museum of Homelessness is a registered charity no 1164091
Registered with the Information Commissioners Office.