

# UK homelessness figures rise amid council funding crisis

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Homeless charities and local housing authorities in the UK are struggling with record numbers of people unable to balance the costs of renting a property with increasingly expensive food, energy and other basic needs.

As of March, 104,510 English households, including 131,000 children, were in temporary accommodation, a 10 percent increase on the previous year and an all-time high.

Between April 2022 and March 2023, English councils supported 298,430 families (1.2 percent of all households) to relieve or prevent homelessness, a 6.8 percent annual increase.

Even when temporary accommodation is available, families with children often spend years living in situations which threaten their health, according to Just Fair. Patricia Leatham, who became homeless after her mother's death, spoke of moving into housing without proper heating—a leaky, mouldy and damp place with open wires. She struggled to make it liveable for herself and her son, who desperately needed Wi-Fi for school. “That’s it”, she said, “they’ve given you somewhere to live and you can’t say no.”

This misery stands in the shadow of the monumental residences of the rich. Perhaps the most obscene example is at Embassy Gardens in Nine Elms, southwest London, where, 10 storeys up, sits the “Sky Pool”, described as the world’s first swimming-pool bridge, connecting two sections of the luxury development.

Part of a 230-hectare area stretching from Vauxhall Cross to Battersea Power Station, the Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea (VNEB) development was described two years ago by *Guardian* writer Oliver Wainwright as taking “the inequities of the real estate-industrial complex to extremes. It is a place where penthouses

with private chapels and running tracks loom above crumbling council estates across the railway line, where scores of flats lie empty, held by secretive shell companies in off-shore tax havens, and where the division between absentee investors and owner occupiers confined to poor doors couldn’t be more stark.”

The VNEB was touted as an “opportunity area” and described by former prime minister Boris Johnson as “the greatest transformational story in the world’s greatest city.” Responding to criticisms that the VNEB encourages separateness and absentee ownership, Ravi Govindia, Conservative leader of Wandsworth Council from 2011-22, proclaimed, “London is an international city. It has always had people who didn’t live in their homes for 365 days a year.”

In what was known as Billionaire’s Row in Bishop’s Avenue in the Borough of Barnet, north London, only ruins remain after nine Saudi-owned mansions were abandoned in the early 1990s. By 2014, investigative reporters found the buildings overgrown with vegetation, their swimming pools and ballrooms in a state of advanced decay. The number of **long-term empty homes** in England has increased by 60,000 since 2018, and now stands at over a million properties.

Architects have suggested that up to 300 homes could be built on one site. The owner of the current property is a registered company from the Isle of Man, whose beneficial owner is listed as a Cypriot businessman with a Dubai address. Russell Curtis, director of architecture firm RCKa, asked, “Is it right that there should be land like this sitting in a ridiculously expensive part of London that is unused?” The waiting list for housing in Barnet has more than tripled in the last decade to over 3,000 households.

The Conservative government is waging a war on the

homeless, most notoriously with former Home Secretary Suella Braverman’s proposals to ban tents in urban areas, and description of living on the streets as a “lifestyle choice”.

According to housing charity Crisis and real estate firm Zoopla, only 4 percent of English properties (and 2 percent of London’s) are affordable at the government-set housing allowance rates, which were frozen in 2020. Deborah Garfield, policy manager at the homelessness charity Shelter, observed that social housing stock in England had fallen by 14,100 in the last year alone.

The spiralling housing crisis spurred 158 local councils—more than half of England’s local government organisations—to meet in an emergency summit hosted by Eastbourne Borough Council and the District Councils Network on October 31. Participants reported that more than 20 councils were on the verge of bankruptcy and were overwhelmed by the cost-of-living crisis and the sharp rise in evictions, as well as the shortage of social housing.

In a letter to Tory Chancellor Jeremy Hunt, councillors insisted they would have to start withdrawing services, and requested a meeting in advance of his Autumn Statement. The Local Government Association (LGA) predicted that councils in England faced a funding gap that would reach £4 billion over the next two years, an additional £1 billion on its July forecast. Its analysis showed that “by 2024/25 cost and demand pressures will have added £15 billion (almost 29 per cent) to the cost of delivering council services since 2021/22.”

Hunt was forced to make a gesture, ending the three-year freeze on the local allowance housing cap. The allowance will finally cover the cheapest 30 percent of market properties simply by providing 1.6 million households some £800 in additional support each year.

Housing charities Shelter and Crisis criticized the delay until April 2024, with the latter adding that councils faced immediate financial collapse. The Salvation Army warned that Hunt’s measures would fail to stop the widening poverty gap, and St. Mungo’s predicted a difficult winter with record numbers of rough sleepers.

Jonathan Carr-West of the Local Government Information Unit accused Hunt of simply “tinkering around the edges”. “Each year citizens are paying more

and getting less from their councils, and without significant structural changes to the way funding is allocated it is difficult to imagine these dire straits ending.”

In London alone, 4,068 slept on the street in summer (June to September), over 25 percent more than the previous winter. The *Big Issue* warned that the recent Home Office decision to reduce support for asylum seekers after their claims are processed from 56 to seven days could drive as many as 6,900 onto the streets nationwide by year’s end.

Many rough sleepers are killed by entirely treatable diseases. A new study by University College London, published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, shows that a homeless person dies every seven hours. Some 25 percent of these are under 40, succumbing to tuberculosis, COVID-19, pneumonia, diabetes, gastric ulcers.

Invisible People, a US-based group which reports on the “growing homeless crisis, affordable housing, and the criminalization of homelessness”, noted this month of the situation Britain that crowded conditions in shelters and transitional accommodation cause these diseases to spread, as well as “formerly eradicated plagues, diseases and viruses.”

Only a united movement of the working class—based on a socialist programme guaranteeing the right to housing as one of the basic necessities of life—can end housing inequality and the scourge of homelessness.



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