

# Breaking the Cycle:

Understanding the challenges in accessing wrap-around support for people experiencing homelessness in Scotland



2026 Update

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In 2024, The Salvation Army published a new report entitled Breaking the Cycle. The following briefing provides updated figures on a number of the issues raised in this initial report and shows why, 2 years later, the issues raised within this original report are still prevalent today.

### ***Introduction - It's Not Just About a Roof***

Discussions around homelessness can often centre on provision of accommodation and the need to get people off the streets or temporary accommodation and into longer-term housing.

While these discussions are important, it is vital not to lose sight of the wider support needs that many people experiencing homelessness have and the vital need to address these if we are to help people permanently break the cycle of homelessness.

Every day at The Salvation Army we support individuals who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. We know first-hand that substance use and mental ill health in particular often go hand-in-hand with circumstances like this.

Whether people are using substances to help them cope with the challenges of sleeping rough, or experiencing mental ill health after losing their home, many of these support needs are rooted in homelessness.

That is why, as we approach a Scottish parliament election, conversations around homelessness must seek to go beyond the well-publicised housing crisis and encompass a more holistic and nuanced definition.

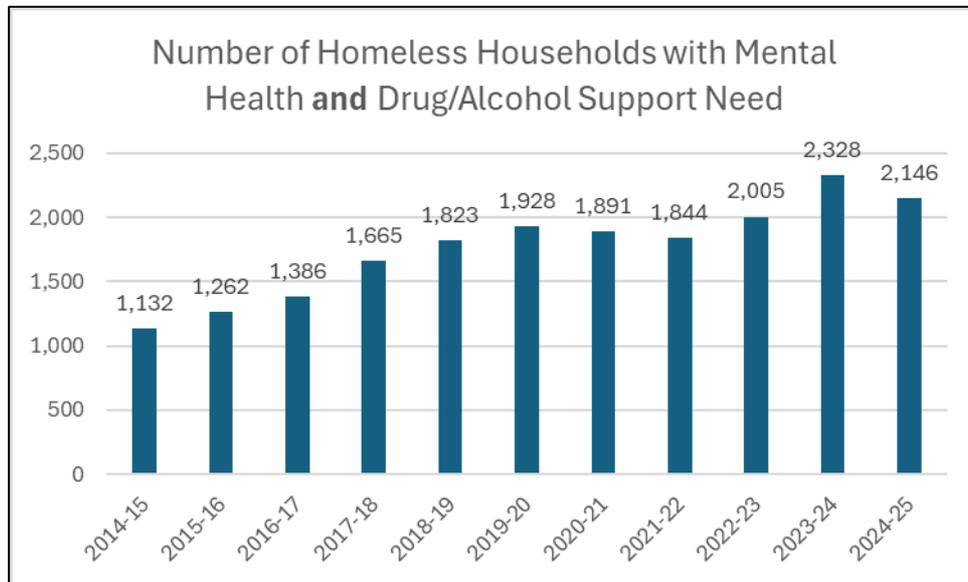
*“Many of the people we seek to serve through our Salvation Army network in Scotland are living with addiction or acute mental health needs. Far too often these are left untreated, leading people back to rough sleeping and other types of homelessness, while lessening their chances of recovery and survival. At The Salvation Army we always put the person first and try to understand individual needs. This is not only morally right, it is also the only way to ensure that the people we support receive the right intervention at the right time.”*

***Helen Murdoch, Assistant Territorial Director Strategic Operations & Development (Scotland), The Salvation Army,***

## The Scale of Need

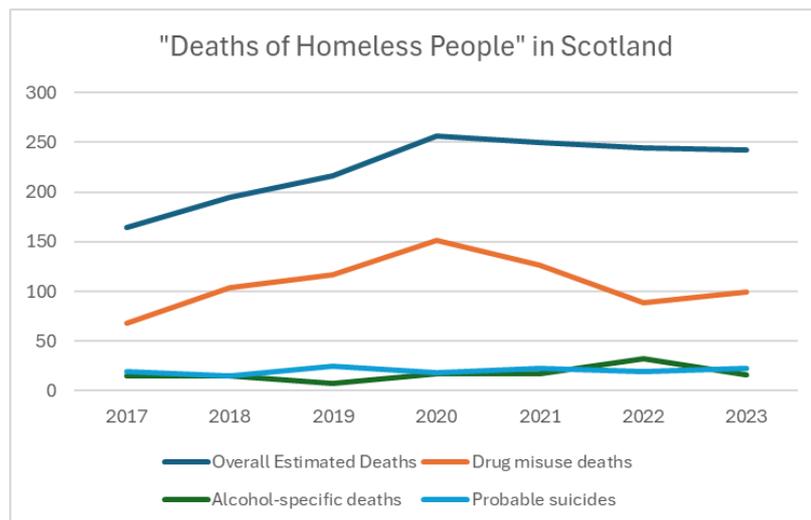
In 2024/2025, 30% of households assessed as either homeless or threatened with homelessness had a support need for mental health<sup>1</sup>. 10% of households had a drug or alcohol dependency support need<sup>2</sup>. This equates to more than 10,000 and 3,000 households (respectively).

But these support needs are not exclusive issues. **New analysis by The Salvation Army** has found that, in the last decade, there has been a 90% rise in the number of households reporting **both** a mental health and drug/alcohol dependency support need<sup>3</sup>.



\*Households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness.

We must also remember that when these support needs go unmet, it can result in the tragedy of a loss of life. According to national figures, 1500 people have lost their lives in Scotland while homeless since 2017<sup>4</sup>. Almost half of these (48%) deaths are attributed to drugs.



<sup>1</sup> Homelessness in Scotland 2024/2025, The Scottish Government, September 2025

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Homeless Deaths 2023, National Records of Scotland, November 2024

## ***Temporary Accommodation***

We are also still seeing continued pressure on temporary accommodation. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, 17,240 households are living in temporary accommodation, a 6% rise on the previous year<sup>5</sup>.

A freedom of information request by The Salvation Army has also found that in the last 2 years, at least 315 people have died while in temporary accommodation<sup>6</sup>.

Of those where we know the type of temporary accommodation, we know that of these deaths;

- 55% occurred in furnished self-contained accommodation (including flats)
- 14% occurred in hostels
- 12% occurred in B&Bs
- 6% occurred in hotels
- 3% occurred in supported living
- 9% occurred in 'other' forms of accommodation

This context shows why it is so important for people experiencing homelessness to access wrap around support for issues like addiction and mental health.

## ***Barriers to Support***

In 2024 we conducted research with our own staff to understand some of the systematic barriers that are preventing this from happening:

### ***Postcode Lottery of Support***

The availability of wrap-around support for issues like addictions and mental health vary among local authorities. One service manager spoke of having worked in two different local authorities and the lack of substance use support in one area compared to the plentiful amount in the other. This meant that while individuals in one area could relatively easily access a variety of support, such as residential rehab, recovery cafés or needle exchanges, in the other area it was difficult to access support without travelling

*“The addictions services are not good, and the facilities for the guys are not good. There’s nothing. There’s two fellowship meetings a week, whereas you could go to five a day in Glasgow. One recovery café a week.”*

***Louise, Service Manager, The Salvation Army***

### ***Lack of Out of Hours Support***

Even when individuals have started accessing treatment, there has still been a problem with availability of provision.

One of the issues that has been highlighted within The Salvation Army has been the lack of addiction support available at the weekend or in the evening. For example, most addiction services are closed on Saturdays and Sundays - precisely the times when people we support are likely to suffer a relapse or other challenges. By Monday morning, these experiences can have

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<sup>5</sup> Homelessness in Scotland 2024/2025, The Scottish Government, September 2025

<sup>6</sup> This is likely an underestimate due to several factors:

- Several local authorities were unable to provide data in a comparable way, therefore their data has not been included in the aggregate total.
- Some local authorities provided redacted data for confidentiality reasons. Where LAs provided “less than” data this was taken as “1” as it was the minimum figure we could be confident of.

had a severe impact on someone's recovery journey, which could have been avoided if support was available over the weekend.

**New analysis by The Salvation Army found that only 1 in 5 drug services in Scotland are open at the weekend and up to 15 LAs could be without any drug support service at the weekend<sup>7</sup>.**

*"There are no services open here after 5pm and I cant get any support outside the centre, it's like my mental health and addiction don't matter after 9am-5pm or at the weekend"*

**Resident, The Salvation Army**

*"I think the challenge that I find most frustrating is if somebody does want to engage in ... it's like somebody might want to engage at 6 pm tonight ... but by 9 am tomorrow morning they will have changed their mind."*

**Joanne, Specialist Support Worker, The Salvation Army**

### **Stigma of Substance Use**

We know from our wider work in The Salvation Army that many people are still put off the idea of seeking addiction support because of the stigma that is attached to drug use. We also know of clients who are reluctant to attend their local chemist for fear of judgemental looks and comments.

*"I feel stigmatised just walking into the addiction team due to the location in the city centre, people see me walking in there and know exactly what I am going for."*

**Resident, The Salvation Army**

### **Dual Diagnosis**

It is very common for people experiencing homelessness to have mental health support needs at the same time as drug or alcohol support needs. This often results in individuals being blocked from accessing important services because certain mental health treatment is offered only if someone is not taking substances.

*"The mental health is the same. If you have drug issues, they just put you to the side. It's drug related, we can't help you while you are on drugs. So, guys are stuck in limbo. 'Cause guys can't stop using drugs. If they could stop using, then believe me they would. This isn't their choice, they need to use to cope. They need further support, they can't just be put to the side. Everyone needs help and everyone deserves their change."*

**Phil, Support Worker, The Salvation Army**

### **A Misunderstanding of Housing First**

Housing First is a specialised service operating internationally for people who have experienced long-term or recurrent homelessness. It offers permanent housing as quickly as possible when homelessness has not been prevented and puts in place wrap-around support, linking people into services to address other issues. Housing First is intended for the small group of people experiencing homelessness who require support but where supported accommodation is not suitable.

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<sup>7</sup> This analysis was based on the Scottish Drugs Forum's Scottish Drug Services Directory

At The Salvation Army we believe Housing First can be a positive way to address deeply entrenched rough sleeping. In our own Housing First services we see individuals thrive when equipped with the appropriate wrap-around support.

However, for Housing First to work properly and to get the desired outcomes, individuals must be given the right wrap-around support to help with issues such as substance use and mental health. We have concerns that in some cases, people are not getting the wrap-around support they need and, in this case, the potential pressure of having a tenancy is in fact doing more harm than good.

Some local authorities have assumed that The Salvation Army will handle all support once the individual has been given a tenancy. This is not the case, and individuals still require specialist support that must be arranged through the local authority, but this is often not being met. This means that some individuals are being placed in a tenancy without the tools they need to maintain it.

*“We’ve had many occasions where other agencies say, “Well we don’t need to do anything because they’ve got Housing First.” They seem to think the Housing First workers provide that wrap-around support. They don’t look at their role within that support ... There is this misconception that means Housing First alone is this wrap-around service, so it’s Housing First that provides that wrap-around support, rather than it being a multi-disciplinary approach.”*

***Jill, Housing First Service Manager, The Salvation Army***

## *Conclusion and Recommendations*

Two years after we published *Breaking the Cycle*, current data shows that we are still seeing many people experiencing homelessness in urgent need of wrap-around support for addiction and mental health.

We believe the recommendations set out below provide an opportunity to start to change this narrative and give many people in Scotland the tools and support they need to finally break the cycle of homelessness.

1. All local authorities in Scotland to analyse the cause of death of any individual who dies while in temporary accommodation arranged by the council or a Housing First tenancy. This information should be promptly reviewed in order to identify any trends in need of action by the local authority.
2. Cities and regions with high levels of rough sleeping to introduce a similar recording system of the rough sleeping population as in London (Combined Homelessness and Information Network statistics).
3. Scottish Government, local authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) to work together to ensure there is drug, alcohol and mental health support available at evenings and weekends in all local authority areas. One option is to do this through a one-stop hub for drug and alcohol support.
4. Drug and alcohol policy should be treated predominantly as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice matter across the UK.
5. People housed in temporary accommodation to be prioritised in receiving specialist support for substance use and mental health.
6. Housing First tenants to be prioritised in receiving specialist support for substance use and mental health. We support Housing First Scotland's call for Housing First tenants to be 'passport' into specialist services when these are needed.
7. No individual, especially if they are experiencing homelessness, should be denied mental health support on the basis that they are using drugs or consuming alcohol.

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