

06 January 2025

Our Ref: FOI 619

Request

We received your request on 09 December 2024 for the following information:

We have noted references to a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol in

a) The Way Home – homelessness response to Covid-19

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/4e5d87dd-f5ce-47df-803d-e3f11fbb0fe4/Homelessness-Reset-Plan-The-Way-Ahead.pdf>

b) Year 4-5 annual progress report (2020-21 and 2021-22), Ending Homelessness Together at [https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/f4417083-79ea-4661-ba1e-818aabcecf25/Year-4_5-Annual-Progress-Report-2020-21-and-2021-22-\(PDF-3-MB\).pdf](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/f4417083-79ea-4661-ba1e-818aabcecf25/Year-4_5-Annual-Progress-Report-2020-21-and-2021-22-(PDF-3-MB).pdf)

*c) Year 1 Annual Progress report, Ending Homelessness Together 2022-27
<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/2bdc28ae-cc67-4ab5-842e-0b3908188971/Year-1-Annual-Progress-Report-2022-2023.pdf>*

Please provide a copy of the actual SWEP guidance/planning documents.

Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

Our response

Please see attached file which details the Housing Executive's Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP).

This concludes our response.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

1.0 Definition and Objective

- 1.1 Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) provides an outline of arrangements to ensure availability of accommodation to people sleeping rough when there is an increased risk of death due to the weather e.g., temperatures fall near or below freezing.
- 1.2 The objective of the Protocol is to ensure that all relevant agencies take the necessary action to provide all rough sleepers with access to shelter where they are at risk due to severe weather conditions.
- 1.3 While this document outlines arrangements within Northern Ireland relevant to the implementation of a SWEP the hyperlink below provides a general overview as a means of further background information on general principles of SWEP:

[Homelessness Link – Severe Weather Emergency Protocol \(SWEP\) Frequently Asked Questions¹](#)

1.4 Support via a SWEP is applicable to the following client groups:

- For those applicants who are statutorily homeless temporary accommodation is applicable beyond the duration of any SWEP.
- For those applicants who are not statutorily homeless but have recourse to public funds temporary accommodation is only applicable during the period in which the SWEP is called.
- For those rough sleepers who are No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), it is not possible to provide direct provision in respect of temporary accommodation and assistance will instead focus on support provided by charitable organisations.

2.0 What factors will guide the implementation of a SWEP?

- 2.1 The Housing Executive will consider implementing SWEP in periods of severe weather which can include but is not limited to.
- Extreme cold, including snow and ice
 - Temperatures dipping below zero

¹ [Severe Weather Emergency Protocol FAQs February 2020 9KRmXPP.pdf \(kxcdn.com\)](#)

- Wind – dependent on wind speed and if accompanied by other aspects such as temperatures below zero
 - It should be noted that consideration of windy conditions in isolation will include a review of any weather warning and particularly, the description provided by the Met Office i.e. if a weather warning includes a reference to travel disruption due to wind it may not result in a SWEP being called whereas more severe wind may refer to windy conditions impacting upon buildings.
- Storms
- Heavy Rain/flooding
- Excess heat

2.2 The Housing Executive will also utilise MET Office weather warnings (yellow, amber and red) to determine if SWEP should be triggered. These warnings are received by relevant staff in Homelessness Policy & Strategy and will be immediately circulated to relevant colleagues in the consideration of a SWEP. This will include the following staff;

- Assistant Director, Housing Services Central Unit
- Head of Homelessness Policy & Strategy
- Head of Homeless Projects
- Homelessness Strategy Manager
- Out of Hours Homelessness Manager
- Relevant staff within Homelessness Policy & Strategy & Homeless Projects (including Homelessness Contracts Manager and Lead Project Officers)

2.3 In cases where weather associated with the conditions outlined in 2.1 or 2.2 is applicable, it is the role of either the Head of Homelessness Policy & Strategy or the Homelessness Strategy Manager to circulate a recommendation to those identified as above. In order for the recommendation to stand, a further two people from those consulted should agree with the original recommendation. If there are any disagreements as to whether a SWEP should be implemented, a meeting will be organised immediately to discuss and agree on a course of action.

2.4 On any occasion where both the Head of Homelessness Policy & Strategy and the Homelessness Strategy Manager are both out of office, it is their responsibility to ensure that arrangements are in place for the monitoring of weather conditions and subsequent issuing of a SWEP recommendation should it be required.

2.5 It is acknowledged that while a weather warning will be the most likely trigger for the implementation of a SWEP, there may be occasions outside of a weather warning on which a SWEP will be required. Primarily, any weather that may pose a threat to anyone sleeping rough will be considered. For cold weather, zero degrees will provide a baseline trigger point, however, a common-sense approach which includes factors such as wind chill, snow, ice etc. which may create a '*feels like*' temperature of below zero will also be considered.

2.6 While a weather warning will be the primary factor driving the implementation of a SWEP it is acknowledged that there may not be a requirement for the calling of a SWEP on all occasions on which a weather warning is issued. There have been numerous examples of where a weather warning has been issued due to rain and no SWEP was required to the absence of other associated weather conditions such as freezing temperatures.

3.0 Business Continuity

3.1 The SWEP has been developed with consideration to the Housing Executive's Business Continuity Management Process. As part of this, the Emergency Planning Business Continuity Steering Group will be notified on any occasion on which a SWEP is implemented. The Executive Team will also be notified as part of this communication. Additionally, the Housing Executive will engage with other agencies as and when required. It is, however, noted that the threshold for a SWEP will differ from wider emergency incident planning where there may be a higher threshold for such arrangements. Homelessness Policy & Strategy will engage with Emergency Planning & Business Continuity in respect of any wider multi-agency emergency responses.

4.0 When will a SWEP be called?

4.1 A SWEP will be called as soon as possible upon identification of relevant weather conditions. This approach is desirable to provide all relevant stakeholders with most time possible to facilitate adequate planning such as any additional staffing required for street outreach or extended opening of day services/communal areas. Ideally, a SWEP will be called by 9:30am at the latest on the morning of implementation to allow appropriate planning.

5.0 SWEP in Operation: Roles and Responsibilities

5.1 The calling of a SWEP will be guided by the process outlined in 2.2.

- 5.2 When SWEP is triggered, action will be taken to identify additional provision to assist for the period during which a SWEP is to be implemented. A key consideration in such actions will include contacting relevant providers in any applicable area(s) to check if additional capacity can be arranged overnight i.e. securing additional communal spaces in the voluntary or faith sectors as an example.
- 5.3 Homeless Projects have a list of providers who have provided an in principle agreement to facilitate provision during SWEP. On any occasions when SWEP is called these providers will be contacted to confirm provision. Additionally, staff will also seek to engage with other providers who may be able to provide additional capacity for the duration of a SWEP. Homelessness Contracts will confirm any additional capacity with day centres such as Welcome Organisation in Belfast and Foyle Haven in Derry/Londonderry (if required).
- 5.4 Upon confirmation that a SWEP will be implemented, staff in Belfast Housing Solutions and the Out of Hours Homelessness Service will be contacted to advise of the decision and to note ongoing efforts to secure additional provision. Upon confirmation of such provision, a further email will be issued to both teams. This will include an overview of the providers, number of spaces/crash facilities and any specific details regarding type of room and accommodation, along with referral arrangements.
- 5.5 Additionally, an email will be issued to all relevant Area Managers outside of Belfast advising that a SWEP will be implemented and such will be asked to notify the Homelessness Policy and Strategy Team if they are or become aware of any individuals rough sleeping. In such circumstances, arrangements for support will be considered on a case by case basis due to the relatively low number of rough sleepers outside of Belfast.
- 5.6 While specific arrangements are made in Belfast due to the consistent presence of rough sleepers, further arrangements for other areas are made as and when required based on consultation with Area Managers.
- 5.7 The Homelessness Policy & Strategy Team will engage with the Communications Team as and when appropriate, in order to identify whether any promotion of a SWEP should be provided. The approach to date has included a general social media notification advising individuals to contact Welcome Organisation for Belfast, First Housing for Derry/Londonderry and the Housing Executive's Homelessness number for all areas outside of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

- 5.8 Where a member of the public identifies a rough sleeper the Outreach Team should investigate, if the rough sleeper is in Belfast and/or Derry/Londonderry. If the rough sleeper identified is outside Belfast or Derry/Londonderry, arrangements should be made to contact the relevant Area Manager. The Area Manager (or a delegated member of staff from Housing Solutions within a respective area) should arrange to make contact with that rough sleeper to determine their circumstances and offer a placement if appropriate.
- 5.9 While every endeavour will be made to give as much notice as possible, it is recognised that it may not always be possible to give advance notice. Once the SWEP implementation is agreed, where the warning is applicable to Belfast or Derry/Londonderry the Outreach Teams will immediately identify rough sleepers within the locality and work with the Housing Solutions Teams to find appropriate placements or provide accommodation via the additional arrangements provided as part of any SWEP. In cases where accommodation is not provided by close of business, the Outreach Team will liaise with the Out of Hours Service, who will seek to identify the most appropriate option dependent on availability.
- 5.10 Temporary accommodation will be sought via normal channels (e.g. voluntary sector hostels, external placements) but it is acknowledged that due to the pressure on demand for temporary accommodation there is a need to explore communal provision in options such as drop in centres or by engaging with providers in the faith sector who may be willing to assist e.g. church halls.

6.0 SWEP – Duration and Step Down

- 6.1 It is anticipated that in most cases the duration of SWEP will be determined in advance, specifically with consideration to the length of any weather warning. However, experience to date and the unpredictability associated with weather forecasts, may mean that SWEP will on occasion need to be extended beyond the original agreement. This will be applicable on occasions when the severe weather persists or if snow/ice remains after the warning expires giving a sub-zero feel like temperature. The continued implementation of a SWEP will be subject to review on a daily basis and in these circumstances, relevant teams will be advised on a daily basis if SWEP is extended. When staff are placing clients through SWEP who are not statutorily homeless but have recourse to public funds, these clients should be made aware at the outset by the Housing Advisor that such placements will be reviewed on a daily basis. Customers should be

contacted at step down of SWEP to inform them that the placement has come to an end.

- 6.2 It is acknowledged that on some occasions a weather warning will be applicable for several days and it is may be prudent to call a SWEP for the duration of the weather warning. It is acknowledged that on such occasions there may be an unexpected improvement in conditions, and if that is the case the SWEP will be stood down. In such circumstances, an email will be issued to all relevant teams.
- 6.3 Once SWEP has ended Outreach Teams and any partner organisations should submit relevant invoices to the Homelessness Strategy team who will organise payment and ensure all costs are attributed the to the SWEP budget. If applicable, Area Managers should forward all invoices to the Homelessness Strategy Team for payment.
- 6.4 The Housing Executive should ensure that all rough sleepers accommodated during SWEP have been assessed under the homelessness legislation and appropriate action taken. Services should seek to maintain engagement with hard-to-reach clients. Clients no longer entitled to placements will be asked to leave the accommodation. Services should attempt to link such clients with appropriate support services/charitable agencies.

7.0 **Placements**

- 7.1 Placements should be made from the current temporary accommodation portfolio where possible. All agencies will be asked to identify current capacity and identify additional capacity that can be brought forward in emergency situations. Housing Solutions Teams/Out of Hours Homelessness Service may also call upon Non-Standard accommodation if needed.
- 7.2 Accommodation Providers should, for the duration of the SWEP and within safety parameters, review exclusions and other policies and work to ensure that all rough sleepers can have a place of shelter. It is acknowledged that clients with severe mental health issues, addictions etc. may not have the capacity to contain behaviour and this will result in challenges in securing appropriate accommodation. The provision of accommodation for such individuals will be subject to engagement with relevant outreach organisations to identify if other arrangements e.g. communal/exceptional areas opened as a contingency arrangement are more appropriate.

8.0 **Support**

- 8.1 SWEP arrangements may provide an opportunity to engage with individuals who, in normal circumstances, would not engage with statutory agencies in particularly and potentially voluntary sector organisations. All agencies should take the opportunity to provide assessments and support referrals for hard-to-reach clients that would not normally engage with services.

9.0 **Extreme Heat**

- 9.1 In situations of extreme heat, Outreach Services should ensure the provision of water and sun screen products to rough sleepers. They should provide advice and guidance of the dangers and the necessity to remain in shaded areas and out of direct sunlight.

10.0 **Review and Monitoring**

- 10.1 The Homelessness Strategy Team will be responsible for gathering data in relation to any occasions on which a SWEP is called. SWEP instances will be included in the Homelessness Strategy Annual Progress Report.
- 10.2 The overall protocol will be updated as and when required arising from any feedback that is provided in the ongoing implementation of SWEPS. Should a change to the overall protocol be required, this will be brought to the Executive Team for consideration.

11.0 **Approvals**

- 11.1 The overall principle of a SWEP, including the authority to provide temporary accommodation for those who have recourse to public funds but are not statutorily homeless, was approved by the Executive Team in December 2024. No further approval is required beyond the provision of annual budgets allocated to a SWEP.