

# Citizens Advice Bedford

## Rough Sleepers in Bedford

### 1 Background

- 1a The Department for Communities and Local Government released the autumn 2015 figures for rough sleeping on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016. These showed that, compared to 2014, there had been a 30% increase of rough sleepers across England as a whole with a 38% increase in the Eastern region. Bedford Borough itself reported 51 rough sleepers: an increase of 104% over the previous year. Compared to all other councils across England, Bedford was listed as having the eighth highest number of sleepers.<sup>1</sup>
- 1b However the count gives no details about the rough sleepers, their age, why they are homeless or sleeping rough. It is therefore difficult to get a picture of who these people are and how they might best be helped.
- 1c It is also worth remembering that rough sleepers are only one group of the homeless: the number does not include those living in squats; “sofa-surfing” with friends or family; living in hostels or placed in B&Bs. They are however, the most visible group of homeless.
- 1d This survey was an attempt to get behind these numbers and to construct a fuller picture of this group.
- 1e The survey also links into some wider research Bedford CA is doing into the costs and accessibility of tenancies in the local Private rental sector.

### 2 The Survey

- 2a The survey was conducted on the evening of Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The town centre was divided into four areas (see Appendix 1) and a pair of staff/volunteers worked in each area interviewing rough sleepers. The areas were:
- The town centre
  - West of the centre as far as the railway line
  - East of the centre as far as Newnham Avenue
  - North of the centre as far as Bedford Park

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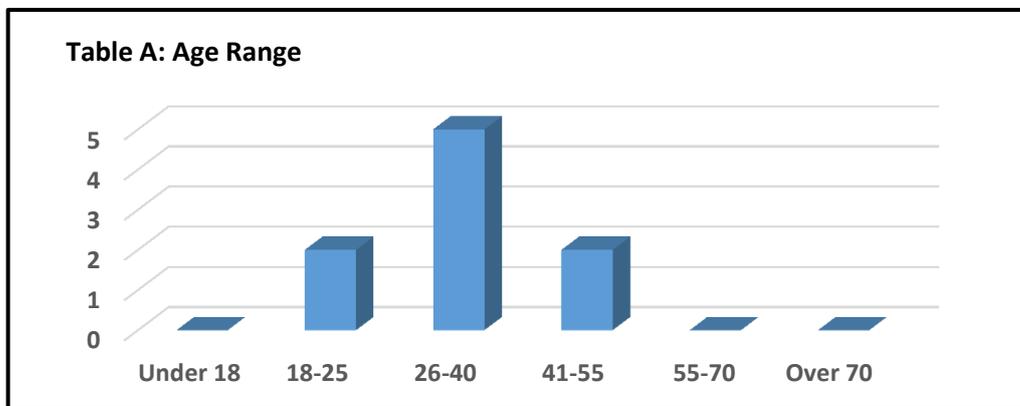
<sup>1</sup> 2015 Rough sleeping Count: Homeless Link:

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/rough-sleeping/rough-sleepingexplore-data>

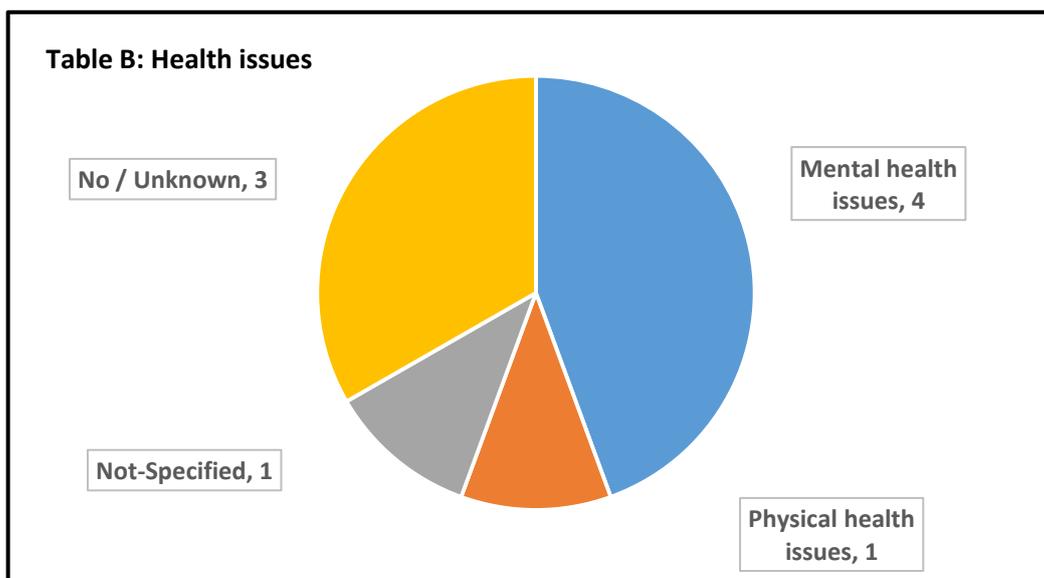
- 2b The interviews were semi-structured in that the interviewers had been briefed on what information was wanted and were left to gain this data as they talked to the rough sleepers. They also noted down other information they gained using a pro-forma provided for this purpose (see Appendix 2).
- 2c Of those approached about half were willing to talk to the interviewers. The sample is thus self-selecting and so cannot be a representative sample. However the 9 interviews equates to just over 17% of Bedford's rough sleepers, as such it can be used to create a picture of this group of Bedford's homeless people.

### 3 Survey Results

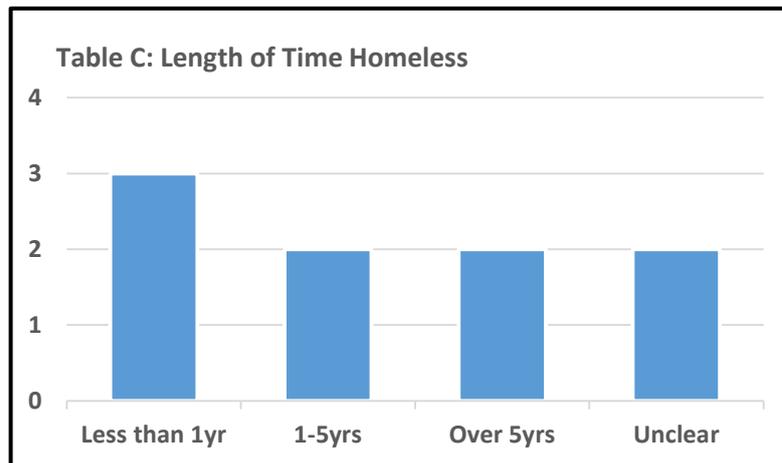
- 3a All the interviewees were White British and all but one were Male. There was some variation in age, though most were aged 26-40 (see Table A below).



- 3b Some, but by no means all, had health issues and most of these were mental health or behavioural conditions rather than physical illnesses or disabilities (see table B).



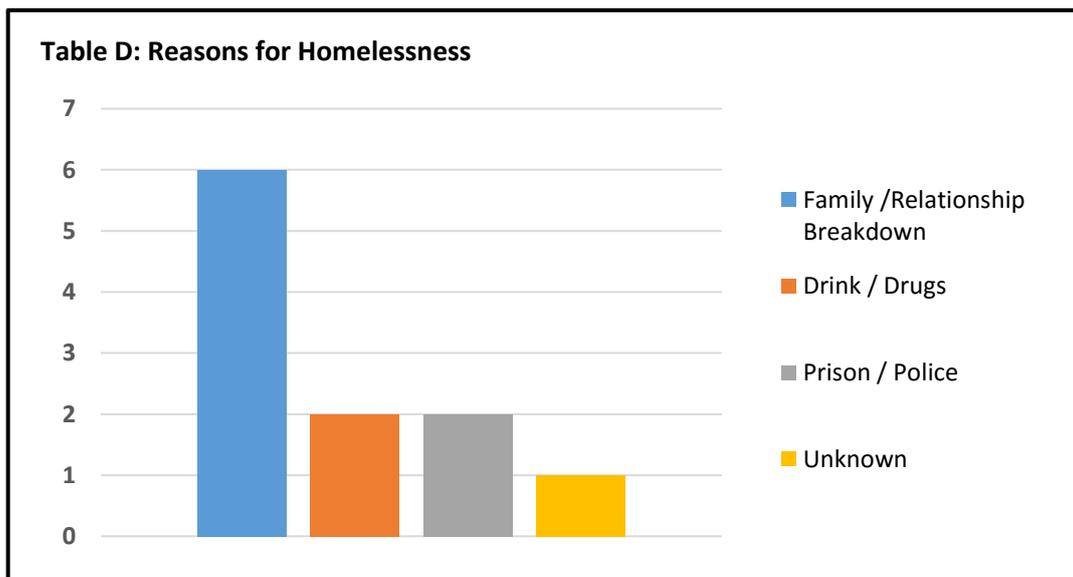
- 3c Despite concern in the past about ex-service personnel and the problems of adjusting to civilian life, none of the interviewees had served in the Armed Forces.
- 3d The interviewees had been sleeping rough for between a few months to over 15yrs (see Table C). However this was fairly evenly divided between those who been constantly homeless and those who had been in and out of some form of accommodation over this period.



- 3e Although there could be multiple reasons for being homeless, three were cited by the interviewees (Table D). The most common reason was a family or relationship breakdown, in two cases this was the death of a parent and the tenancy not being transferred. In one case the interviewee cited all three reasons: a family breakdown caused by or causing a drink/drugs problem and involvement with the Police. None cited the costs of renting as an issue. This is not to say that rough sleepers are somehow to blame for their own predicament,

*. .the causation of homelessness is complex, with no single ‘trigger’ that is either ‘necessary’ or ‘sufficient’ for it to occur. Individual, interpersonal and structural factors all play a role – and interact with each other .<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> p2 The homelessness monitor: England 2016: JRF Jan 2016



3f Of those who had been in and out of accommodation since originally being made homeless, the same range of reasons were given for being unable to keep it and again the costs of renting were not cited as an issue in itself. Two interviewees commented that they had recently been given accommodation but had problems furnishing / equipping them and could not access grants for furniture, electrical appliances etc. The Homelessness Monitor report also comments upon this pattern of people returning to the streets:

*one possible contributory factor may be cutbacks in Supporting People 'preventative' services (see Chapter 3) making it more difficult for vulnerable groups to sustain their accommodation, particularly those with mental health or substance misuse problems,<sup>3</sup>*

3g Two interviewees admitted that they had been in and out of prison and a third intimated this but offered no details. A fourth said that he had been in trouble with the Police but this would not appear to have resulted in a prison term so may have been for anti-social rather than criminal behaviour.

3h A similarly mixed picture emerged when the interviewees were asked about their links to Bedford. Five had lived in Bedford prior to being homeless and three others had family connections elsewhere in the county or the bordering areas. Only one had no connection at all with the area.

3i A number of the interviewees were keen to point out that they did not beg, relying instead upon soup kitchens, drop-in centres and scavenging for food in shop bins. One interviewee commented that the support facilities in Bedford were better than elsewhere, though it is impossible to identify where he was comparing Bedford to. Two specifically said that they had an income (In one case JSA, in the second a company / disability pension probably resulting from an industrial accident. Two interviewees also mentioned seeing, or having seen their GPs, suggesting that they do have some access to health treatment.

<sup>3</sup> p52 The homelessness monitor: England 2016: JRF Jan 2016

3j What also emerges from the interview notes is a level of anger, resentment and resignation.<sup>4</sup>

- Anger towards those in authority e.g.:
  - When applying for JSA – *“they said he had to use computer and he never used one. Told he would have to go on a course so he walked away and has never been back”*.
  - *“Has used support services but feels un-listened too”*.
  - *“Recently had a stay in hospital – was sent out homeless – no after care.. very angry about this”*
- Resentment against immigrants and particularly the Polish community, not necessarily for causing the homelessness but for using facilities they see as theirs – *“stealing their (i.e. the interviewees) food from the Soup Kitchen”*.
- Resignation to their own situation –
  - *“Said he was used to his situation and did not want help”*.
  - *“Impression that he would like to sort out his life but his disabilities make it difficult and he is used to this life”*

In this context it is worth noting that the interviewees reported that about half the rough sleepers approached refused to speak to them, and those who did only did so when convinced they were not the Police or “government” suggesting there is a level of suspicion of others which could impact on those trying to help them.

3k There is also a sense of independence, that they do not need help and are quite capable of coping. This sense of independence amongst some rough sleepers is also illustrated by a note from one of the interviewees on a campsite near Aspects to the east of the town centre:

*. . not occupied : 3 tents : large and smallest is a 2 person tent: Canopy area for cooking, Fire Cold. Numerous bicycle frames and bits and 2 bicycles chained together. Metre Sq of general rubbish inc clothes, shoes and food packaging. Area adjacent to the river is used as latrine for washing and lavatory. – Visited site twice no sign of occupants and no response to calls.*

3l One interviewee said that he had used Citizens Advice in the past and two others said that they were not aware that we could help and that they might use us, though whether they actually will is another question.

#### **4 Picture of a Rough Sleeper**

4a Without stereotyping, the survey does help to provide a picture of who a rough sleeper in Bedford is likely to be.

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations are from the interviewees’ notes of the interviews, not necessarily directly from the interviewees.

- 4b A rough sleeper is likely to be a young mature man, white British with some connection to Bedford or the surrounding area (say within 25 miles). He was probably originally made homeless by a family or relationship breakdown, possibly caused or complicated by drink, drugs and/or criminal or anti-social behaviour. He will probably have some health problems which are as likely to be long-term mental health issues (which may also have contributed to the family/relationship breakdown) as physical health concerns. He may or may not have a criminal record. If he has been offered accommodation in the past he has been unable to hold on to it.
- 4c His attitude is likely to be a big barrier to helping him. Even if he is willing to talk, there is a degree of hostility towards those in authority and a reluctance to give detailed information – information which would be needed to help him properly, particularly to access any benefits due. He may also have the view that he is beyond or does not need help, this may be a genuine sense of independence or a defence mechanism to avoid interventions from those in authority.
- 4d With regard to this picture of rough sleepers compared to that created by recent interviews in the local papers it is worth noting that not all homeless people who are on the street during the day are rough sleepers (e.g. some may have hostel places or be “sofa surfing”). These other homeless people may also use soup kitchens and other facilities used by rough sleepers and journalists investigating “homelessness” may not distinguish between them.

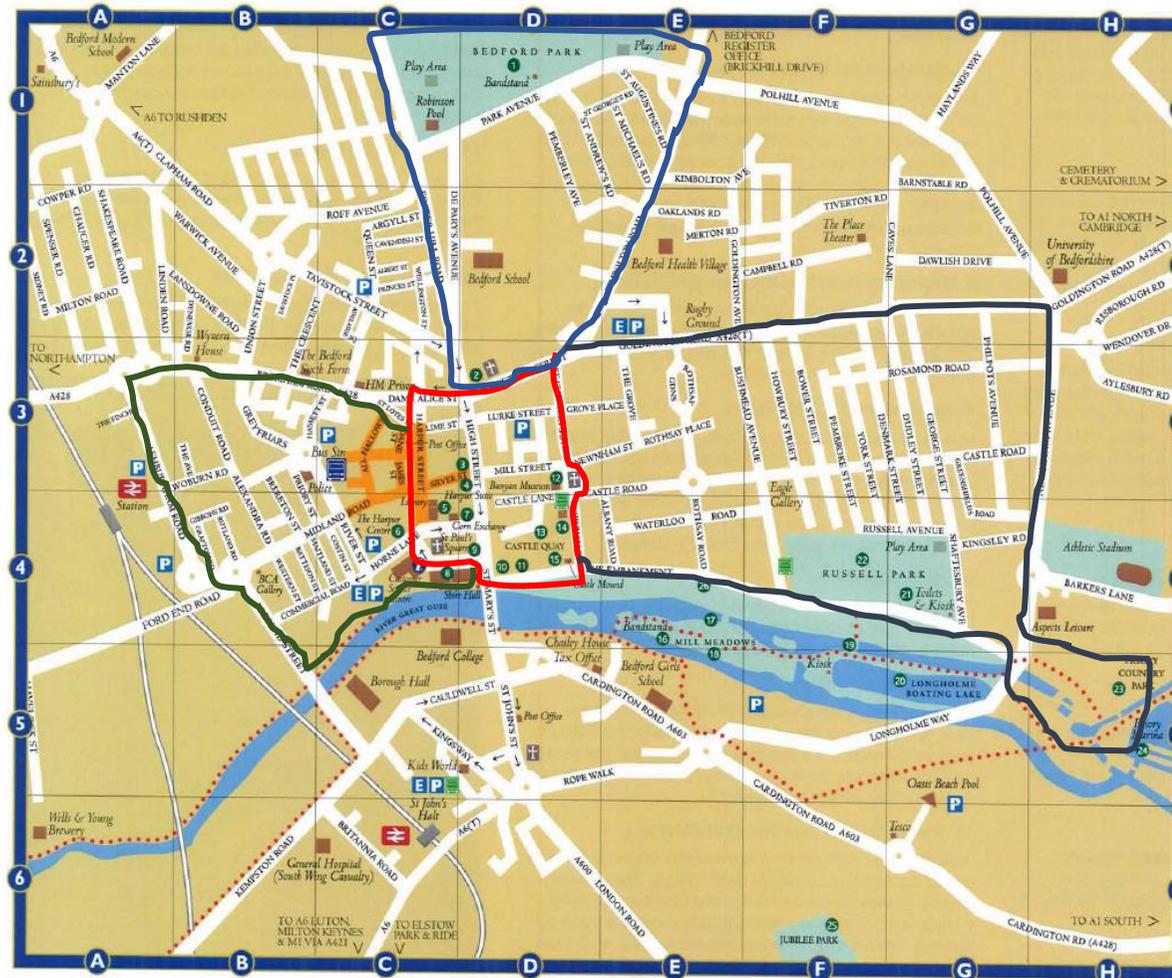
## 5 Conclusions

- 5a Rough Sleepers appear to present a complex set of issues beyond simply needing support to access services and benefits and help to *“get back on their feet”*. The pattern of being in and out of various types of accommodation linked to drink / drug issues and difficulties with relationships, suggests that some at least would require on-going support to help them *“stay on the their feet”* once established in accommodation.
- 5b Regarding our own wider work on the private rental sector, it is difficult to blame the increase in rough sleepers on practices within this sector. The issues causing their homelessness appear to be much more fundamental than the availability or affordability of tenancies.

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Bedford Citizens Advice  
March 2016*

# Appendix 1

## Bedford Town Centre Map



### Key

- 1 Bedford Park including Tennis Courts
  - 2 John Bunyan Statue
  - 3 Reflections of Bedford
  - 4 Archbishop Trevor Huddleston
  - 5 Harpur Suite
  - 6 Harpur Centre
  - 7 Corn Exchange
  - 8 Bedford Magistrates Court & County Court
  - 9 John Howard Statue
  - 10 War Memorial (South African War)
  - 11 Swan Hotel
  - 12 John Bunyan Museum
  - 13 Castle Quay & Medieval Lime Kiln
  - 14 The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum
  - 15 Castle Mound
  - 16 Bandstand
  - 17 Suspension Bridge
  - 18 Mill Meadows
  - 19 Butterfly Bridge
  - 20 Longholme Boating Lake
  - 21 Putting Green Kiosk
  - 22 Russell Park
  - 23 Priory Country Park
  - 24 Priory Marina
  - 25 Jubilee Park
  - 26 Bedford War Memorial
  - f Tourist Information Centre & Box Office
  - Pedestrianised shopping area
  - Local facilities
  - P Parking
  - EP Evening parking available
  - CP Coach parking
  - CB Coach bay
  - ... Cycle/foot path (Traffic free)
  - One way road
- Toilets are located in the Harpur Centre and Mayes Yard (off St. Paul's Square)

## Appendix 2

### Homelessness Survey 2016: Interview Recording Pro-forma

This form is intended as a guide to the information we would like to collect and to help record information during or after the interview as appropriate. If the issue/question did not arise enter "Not covered". Enter "No" or "None" if response was negative.

<b>Interviewer's Initials:</b>		<b>Interview No.</b>		
<b>General Information</b>				
Gender	Male / Female			
Age	Under 18 / 18-25 / 26-40 / 41-55 / 55-70 / Over 70 / Unknown			
Nationality		Ethnicity		
Disability / Health Issues				
If Ex-Service:	Service Arm:	Years of Service	Rank on leaving	Year left:
<b>Information about being Homeless</b>				
How long has subject been homeless				
Cause of homelessness				
How many times has subject been homeless and when first homeless				
Ever had a tenancy & if so experience of this				
Connection to Bedford if any – or why in Bedford.				
Other information collected				