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Cliff Saran's Enterprise blog

A powerful case for more open data

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A panel discussion at the [recent State Open Con 24 conference](#) has shone a spotlight on the red tape, inefficiency and political moves that prevent opening up data sets to tackle a crisis affecting thousands of people.

According to data from the Office of National Statistics, in England, 278,110 households were assessed as either being at risk of homelessness or already homeless in April 2021. However, alongside the types of homelessness captured by statutory and rough sleeping statistics, the ONS said there exist other forms of homelessness that are less well evidenced and understood.

For instance, as [panel member, Alessandro Nicoletti](#), a researcher at national youth homeless charity Centrepoint discussed at the event, many young people might be sofa surfing, sleeping at a friend's, going from one house to another house and not really approaching their Council or asking for support. But they do not have a roof over their heads and they may be living in poverty.

Centrepoint sent over 300 freedom of information requests to local authorities in England in order to build a better picture of homelessness among young people.

Wandsworth and Richmond council's Salman Kalm, who also spoke in the panel discussion, spoke about the difficulty in getting a clear picture of homelessness in the borough. While local authorities administer housing benefits, they have no access to Universal Credit. This means, as he points out, they are unable to see if someone has had UC dropped and so may be at risk of falling into rent arrears. They may be evicted and potentially find themselves homeless.

Lack of housing stock is the answer politicians fall back on when quizzed over the crisis. It may be easy to point a finger at the rough sleepers in London or other major cities, but if the councils lack the data, they are unable to support these people.

The Open Data Institute's report on the [cost of living crisis](#) published in September 2023 highlights several improvements that could be made, to support those who help rehome the homeless. Among the challenges local authorities face include a lack of resources and a concern about data protection. As central government is usually the provider of official statistics, this makes it hard for local governments to publish data they collect and hold openly, the ODI said. It suggests that open data, produced by collaborating with stakeholders and sector experts, could help to fill in the gaps in official statistics on homelessness.

Politicians will talk about the need to build more affordable homes. This is clearly a big factor in addressing homelessness and it is something voters can understand. But there is a case for open data to play a significant role.

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