

Homeless Section
Wat Tyler East
Beckhampton Street
Swindon
SN1 2JH

You can contact the Homeless Section by:

Telephone: 01793 463181

Fax: 01793 463307

Minicom: 01793 436659

The Homeless Section is open:
Monday – Friday 9am – 4.30pm

Don't forget to complete your application form in full and collect any documents we might need to see. Our appointment letter lists the items you will need to bring with you when you come in for your appointment.

If you require this information in large print or another format then please contact Customer Services on 01793 463725

REF:HO 0004 / FOI 2139 / 06



Homeless in Swindon

Notes:

using offensive language, we will stop dealing with them.

Please keep these notes for reference you.
Please ask your caseworker to explain anything you are unsure about.

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Section 1

What service do we offer?

We appreciate this is a difficult time for you and we will do all we can to help.

If you apply to the Homeless Section, we will carry out an assessment/duty interview and decide how we can help you.

We have to consider whether we have a legal duty towards you, and:

- If so, how we will fulfil that duty
- If not, how else we can help you

Please remember that, even if you think you are homeless or threatened with homelessness, we might not have a legal duty to find you a home. And even if we agree that we have a duty towards you, we might not be able to give you the type of home you would like.

However, we will try to do all we can to help you find a home, every year the Homeless Section deals with over 2,000 applications. Our duties towards homeless people are set out in law.

Despite the serious housing shortage in this area and whether or not we accept that you are homeless. Under our Housing Options Scheme, everyone who approaches us with a housing problem will receive help on the options available to them.

Section 2

What happens first if I apply as homeless?

First you will have an interview with a Duty Officer who will decide if you need to see a homeless caseworker. S/he will be responsible for making enquiries into your application, and will tell you when this has been done and what the decision is.

If you need to be interviewed in another language we have an arrangement with Language

We realise that different people have different needs, and in assessing cases we will try to meet these differing needs wherever possible.

We will:

- Interview you at a convenient place if you are unable to come to the office
- Interview you in private if you wish
- Ensure that you only see a woman officer, if you prefer
- Arrange for an interpreter
- Provide Minicom and hearing loop facilities for people with hearing difficulties
- Provide wheelchair-accessible offices and facilities

What can I do if I am not satisfied?

We do our best to give as good a service as possible but we cannot always help everyone in the way they would like.

All clients of Housing may use our formal complaints procedure.

How can I help you?

We will try to give you the best service possible, within our resources and legal duties, but regrettably we cannot provide a home to everyone who applies to us. Please show courtesy to our staff. If a customer abuses or harasses a member of staff in any way, including

- Aim to complete enquiries into your application within 33 working days
- Answer the telephone promptly and reply to messages the same or next working day
- Reply to your letters within 10 days
- See you within 5 minutes of your appointment time
- Be polite and courteous at all times
- Deal with any complaint you make in an open, professional and fair manner
- Regularly ask for your opinion and suggestions on the service we give
- Tell you our performance targets and how well we are meeting them
- Treat everyone fairly and with courtesy and respect regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc.

What can I do as a customer to help you provide a good service?

- Give us the information we ask you for as soon as possible
- Always make an appointment to see your caseworker
- Attend appointments on time and with all the information we have requested.
- Tell us about any changes in your circumstances
- Be polite and courteous to us

Line, which is a service the Homeless Persons' Unit uses to speak to you in your own language.

You will be given a card with your caseworker's name and office telephone number. You should contact them about anything to do with your application. Either telephone your caseworker, or make an appointment to see them at the office. If you want to see them in person you will need an appointment, as they may not be available without notice.

If there is any change in your situation between your first interview and our decision, you MUST tell your caseworker immediately.

What we need to know

We will consider your application under the Housing Act 1996, Part VII, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002. This broadly means that we have a legal duty to make certain enquiries and tell you what we can do for you after that. We need to find out if:

- You are legally homeless or threatened with homelessness within the next 28 days
- You are eligible for accommodation or assistance under the law on homelessness
- We consider that you have a priority need as set out in law, e.g. you have young children,

are pregnant or have a serious medical condition, and

- Your homelessness is your own fault – for example, if you failed to pay your rent or mortgage when you had the money to do so, or left your accommodation before you legally had to, you may be intentionally homeless.

We may also consider:

- If you have a local connection with the Borough of Swindon, or if another council should be helping you.

Your caseworker will explain the process to you. In summary, he or she needs to confirm that you:

- are homeless (including the reasons why)
- are eligible for assistance
- are in priority need
- not intentionally homeless, and, in most cases
- have a local connection

You must tell us the truth and give us all the information we need. To protect people who are genuinely homeless, we will take legal action against you if you don't do this.

Your caseworker will ask you to sign your application form authorising us to make necessary enquiries with other agencies. For example, for information about your circumstances we may need to contact:

Can I see my own file(s)?

Yes, you have a legal right to see them. We are happy to copy the file for you although we will charge a fee for the administrative costs (currently £10.00 per file).

We would however need to obtain permission from doctors, social workers or other third parties before this information was made available to you.

Will my address be given out?

No, this is completely confidential and will not be given out without your permission, UNLESS the law says we have to.

Section 5

Our customer service promises

The Homeless Section is open during normal office hours every weekday 9am – 4.30pm. We can also see you at your home if it is difficult for you to come to the office.

We will:

- Do everything we can to prevent homelessness
- Give all housing applicants a housing options leaflet

- doctors
- building societies
- landlords
- solicitors
- the Home Office
- other agencies

We will also need to check that you have lived at the previous addresses that you have given us.

Your caseworker will need to see some papers. These could include:

- proof of your identity
- full birth certificate
- your tenancy agreement
- proof of pregnancy
- a Notice to Quit
- Child Benefit books
- court eviction papers
- Medical papers
- Home Office papers
- Financial statements
- Bank Statements

You should also tell your caseworker:

- If you have any serious medical problems, and
- If there are any areas where it would be dangerous for you to live

We will need to confirm this and we may need to ask other people such as your doctor or the police.

Fraudulent Information

The Council is under a duty to protect the public funds it administers and we may use the information you provide to match it against other information held by the Council, for example Council tax, or Housing benefits.

The Council may also disclose any such information to other public bodies, or similar external agencies, but only for the purpose of the prevention or detection of fraud.

You are, however, required to sign a declaration on the application form, which states that you will give us correct information and will not withhold relevant information, or mislead the Council in any way.

You must also keep us informed of any changes in your circumstances.

The declaration informs applicants that they will be liable to prosecution if any of the information is found to be false. The Council will prosecute, and if you are found guilty, you could be ordered to pay a fine of up to £5,000, as set out in Section 214 of the Housing Act 1996, Part VII.

Section 3

Decisions

We will assess your case as quickly as possible. We will try to let you know how your case is progressing, but some cases can take longer to assess than others. Please feel free to phone your case officer, who will be happy to update you on progress.

If you are approaching us while living with friends or relatives we will need to arrange a visit to this address to confirm that you are homeless, before making a decision on your application. We may also arrange visits to other addresses you have given us. If this is the case we will have to wait for these visits to be completed before we are able to make a decision.

What if you decide I am not homeless?

If your caseworker decides that you are not homeless or threatened with homelessness according to the legal definition, we will do everything we can to try and stop you becoming homeless. We will tell you what you can do to protect your rights to stay in your home. If necessary we will refer you to a solicitor or a local advice agency. They can all try to help you stay in your current home by sorting out any problems you have there.

We will also give you our housing options leaflet, which can help you find alternative housing.

Do you give information to other departments?

Yes, but only in specific circumstances. For example, if you have a social worker we may wish to speak to them about you, or they may be assisting you with your application, so they may contact us.

We may also speak to medical staff who are involved with you, or anyone else who is working with you professionally (e.g. probation service, solicitors, etc.).

In certain circumstances we may also contact other Council staff if we suspect a fraud is being perpetrated against the Council.

What about other organisations such as the DSS or other Government Departments?

Yes, we are required by law to send details to some other organisations. For example, if you are an asylum seeker, we are required to send some details to the Home Office to confirm your immigration status. We will always inform you before doing this.

Your computer records are also protected by the provisions of the Data Protection Act, which outlines what we can and cannot do with our computerised records.

We will, however, ask you for your consent to contact individuals such as doctors, building societies, banks, other local authorities, etc., so that we are able to confirm the information you have given to us.

We do not pass on information, but contact these offices to confirm the information you have given to us.

Will the Homeless Persons' Unit give any information to their housing staff?

Yes, but only information that is necessary to ensure your application is processed as quickly and as fairly as possible. An example of this would be where we need to pass on information about you, to ensure details on your housing register application is up to date.

Please Note:

We will, however, warn other relevant officers if you behave threateningly during an interview, e.g. violence, threats, or racist/sexist comments, or if we think you may pose a danger to others. If this happens, you may be given a letter telling you that this behaviour is unacceptable. We may also set down standards for your future behaviour.

What if you decide I am not eligible for assistance?

The Government has decided that some asylum seekers, some people who are subject to immigration control, and people who are not usually resident in the United Kingdom are not eligible for housing accommodation or assistance. This may mean that we cannot do anything for you under homelessness legislation even if you are homeless and have children. You also may not be allowed to put in an application on the housing register. Please talk to your caseworker about this. They will explain how it affects your housing application and what help you can get.

What if you decide I am intentionally homeless?

If you are homeless through your own fault, we have no duty to find you long-term accommodation. We will only help you by giving advice, assistance and short-term accommodation, if you need it. We will talk to you about other housing options you have.

Your right to request a review

If you are unhappy with the final decision you can appeal against it. You have the right to request a review of the decision under homelessness legislation.

If you accept that I am homeless and a priority case, what happens?

We must help anyone who is homeless, eligible for assistance, in priority need and not intentionally homeless to find suitable accommodation. Unfortunately, secure council or housing association tenancies can only be offered to people who qualify for the housing register and this can take a long time. You can get copies of the housing register scheme and an information leaflet from Housing Reception.

In the meantime, we may arrange bed-and-breakfast, hostel or other temporary accommodation. We recognise that bed-and-breakfast or hostel accommodation is not ideal and we will try to find you suitable alternative temporary accommodation as quickly as possible.

What can you do for me if you do not accept that I am priority homeless?

We understand that everyone who approaches us has some form of housing problem. We will do all we can to offer you housing options. This could include options in the private rented sector. Everyone, even a single person with no health problems, will get a housing options leaflet.

Section 4

Confidentiality & Notification Procedure

Why does the Homeless Persons' Unit need information from me?

We need to assess if the Council has a duty towards you and members of your household. To do this we need to ask you a number of questions relating to where you have been living, your immigration status, details about your children, medical problems and your personal circumstances, such as income and savings.

We will then undertake additional enquiries to confirm what you have told us.

This is done because the law requires us to do so. We also need to ensure that only genuine applications are dealt with.

We also need information about any special needs, so we can take them into consideration if we make any offer of interim or temporary accommodation.

Will the information I give you be kept confidential?

Yes, only staff involved in your homeless and housing register application will have access to our files or computer records.