



BEGGING & ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Crisis' response to the White paper
*Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand
Against Anti-social Behaviour*

April 4th 2003

1. Context – The shifting policy agenda

The last two years have seen a growing emphasis on enforcement as a means of tackling the problems of street homelessness, with an increasing number of police and local authorities making use of existing legislation to introduce bans and fines on beggars.

The recent government white paper, *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour* has supported these developments and proposes to extend powers of enforcement by amending regulations to make begging a recordable offence and allowing courts to impose community sentences.

This briefing focuses specifically on the proposals set out in the White Paper *Respect and Responsibility* to tackle the problems of begging.

2. Summary

People who beg are part of a broader street homelessness problem and are amongst the most vulnerable people in our society. All too often they suffer from both the causes and consequences of anti-social behaviour and as such Crisis welcomes attempts to tackle what is a genuine and significant problem.

Crisis supports the overall aim of the government's plans to create a society based upon the sense of responsibility towards others and to our families and communities¹. However we are concerned by policies that define begging as a problem of anti-social behaviour, rather than social exclusion and that place an inappropriate emphasis upon enforcement as a means of tackling these problems.

Begging is a problem that needs to be dealt with urgently. Those who are in this situation are caught up in damaging and dangerous activities and are trapped in a cycle of poverty and deprivation. However it is Crisis' contention that begging is in itself non-threatening and that where it is accompanied by violent or aggressive behaviour there exist clear means of tackling this.

Research has shown that those who live their lives on the street are desperate to move on², but are without the support and services necessary to do so. Placing a greater emphasis on policies of enforcement will increase street homeless people's contact with the police and the criminal justice system. This is not only a costly and ineffective means of tackling the problems of street homelessness but is unlikely to tackle the root causes of begging and may have the effect of exacerbating the problems facing some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

If policies designed to tackle begging are to be effective it is essential that they aim to deal with the root causes of the problem and address the gaps in support and services, enabling and empowering people to escape their plight.

¹ (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office

²² Fitzpatrick, S. & Catherine, K. (2000) *Getting By: Begging, Rough Sleeping and The Big Issue in Glasgow and Edinburgh*, The Policy Press

3. Anti-social behaviour or social exclusion?

Is begging anti-social?

“Anti-social behaviour in whatever guise, is not acceptable and together we will take responsibility to stamp it out.”³

“Anti-social behaviour means different things to different people – noisy neighbours who ruin the lives of those around them, ‘crack houses’ run by drug dealers, drunken ‘yobs’ taking over town centres, people begging by cash points, abandoned cars, litter and graffiti, young people using airguns to threaten and intimidate or people using fireworks as weapons.”⁴

Crisis response

Crisis believes that it is inappropriate that begging is defined primarily as a problem of anti-social behaviour and placed alongside serious problems such as drug dealing and drunken yobs.

The vast majority of beggars and street drinkers are homeless, many of them are in fact rough sleepers and all of them are vulnerable. Street homeless people suffer from high levels of unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown; few if any are in their situation by choice. Personal crisis and the traumatising nature of homelessness combined with difficulties accessing essential services often means that they are unable to escape their predicament.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the links between begging, rough sleeping and the selling of the *Big Issue* in Glasgow and Edinburgh found that most interviewees had a family background characterised by disruption and trauma. Almost half had been in residential care or foster care and over a quarter reported drug or alcohol misusing parents. A number of interviewees, particularly women, reported being abused as children. Those who had substance dependencies had developed these early on in life as a means of coping with traumatic experiences.

Homeless people's involvement in crime is for the most part low level and lifestyle related⁵ and many are hidden victims of crime with a frequency which would not be tolerated amongst the wider population. Processing vulnerable street homeless people through the criminal justice system not only criminalises them but is a costly and inappropriate means of tackling the problems that they face⁶.

A study by the Revolving Doors Agency of people with mental health and multiple needs who fall through the net of health, housing and social care and who come into contact with the police, found that the police have more contact with this group than social services. The study estimated that the annual cost of this group's arrests was greater than the annual costs to emergency services, community health services or social services, with the cost of police arrests totalling £218,955. The study indicated that early intervention and effective referral could shift the cost of services used by this group away from expensive crisis services – the police,

³ (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office Ministerial foreword

⁴ (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office, p6

⁵ 53% of rough sleepers were involved in public order offences. Ballintyne, S. (1999) *Unsafe Streets – Street Homelessness and Crime*, IPPR, p40

⁶ Ballintyne, S. (1999) *Unsafe Streets – Street Homelessness and Crime*, IPPR

accident and emergency and temporary housing – towards a more appropriate way of supporting this group – primary care, community mental health services – and that this was likely to improve their quality of life.⁷

Police officers have themselves expressed a desire to get beyond enforcement, which is essential in some circumstances but largely inappropriate for dealing with the range of low level nuisance offending undertaken by most street homeless people⁸. Research has indicated that engaging homeless people through partnership working, early intervention and the provision of appropriate support services is a more effective means of addressing the problems surrounding street homelessness.⁹

4. Begging

No one in this country should beg

“No one in this country should beg – it is degrading for them, embarrassing for those they approach and often a detriment to the very areas where environmental and social improvements are crucial to the broader regeneration of the community itself. We need to tackle nuisance and intimidation caused to those going about their lawful business, by people who persistently beg”¹⁰.

Crisis response

All begging is wrong and it is a problem that must be tackled head on but it is primarily a problem of social exclusion and those most damaged by the experience of begging are people who beg. It is essential that we identify the reasons why people beg (for example substance misuse, difficulties with benefits and the a lack of alternatives to street life) and address these problems.

The question of adequate services

“There are places for rough sleepers to sleep at night; there is support and treatment available for their health needs and drug habits, and there are benefits available to pay for food and rent. The reality is that the majority of people who beg are doing so to sustain a drug habit, and are often caught up in much more serious crime. When members of the public give them money on the street it does not help them to deal with their problems.”¹¹

Crisis response

Despite efforts by government and the voluntary sector there remain significant gaps in service provision for vulnerable homeless people and in practice begging and street homelessness can reflect an absence of appropriate support services.

⁷ Revolving Doors Agency (2000) *Mental Health, Multiple Needs and the Police – Findings from the Revolving Doors Agency Link Worker Scheme*, p65-66

⁸ Ballintyne, S. (1999) *Unsafe Streets – Street Homelessness and Crime*, IPPR, p70

⁹ Revolving Doors Agency (2000) *Mental health, Multiple Needs and the Police – Findings from the Revolving Doors Agency Link Worker Scheme*

¹⁰ (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office, p47

¹¹ *ibid*

Crisis interviewed 100 homeless people and found that they were nearly 40 times more likely than members of the general population *not* to have access to a GP.¹²

Despite improvements in the provision of drug treatment in specific areas, there have been difficulties reported on the length of waiting times, a serious problem given that rapid access to treatment is essential for rough sleepers who want to tackle their addiction.

Average length of time taken by organisations accessing specialist services for their clients (in weeks)¹³

Service undertaken externally	Number of weeks
Alcohol assessment	3.5
Drug assessment	4.5
Drug detoxification	10.5
Alcohol detoxification	9.5
Alcohol rehabilitation	11.0
Drug rehabilitation	12.0

(Note: the statistics above are based upon a questionnaire sent to 974 organisations working with homeless people.)

Accessing Housing Benefit continues to present problems. A recent report by the Audit Commission outlined many problems with the current system. In 2000/01, new claims took on average 51 days to be processed in England.¹⁴

The recent RSU evaluation found that whilst “ ready access to hostel beds is an essential part of a programme to help rough sleepers, there were still some difficulties in certain areas and for particular client groups, such as drug users and those with behavioural problems. There can also be difficulties finding places for people with pets and for couples. A recent survey of rough sleepers found that one in six said they had a partner on the streets”¹⁵

What the public think

“The public can feel intimidated by people begging at cash points, outside shops or asking them for money in the street or on trains. Using children and pets to make money from begging is completely unacceptable. Measures to tackle begging are a move to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour, to protect more vulnerable people from being drawn into street activity and to guard against the sustaining of harmful drug addictions.”¹⁶

¹² Crisis (2002) *Critical Condition – Vulnerable Single Homeless People and Access to GPs*, p1

¹³ Bevan, P. & Van Doorn, A. (2001) *“Fact or fiction? Supporting People with Multiple Needs”*, Multiple Needs Good Practice Briefing, London, Homeless Link, p10

¹⁴ Audit Commission (2001) *Housing Benefit Administration – Learning from Inspection*, Audit Commission

¹⁵ Randall, G. & Brown, S. (2002) *Helping Rough Sleepers off the Streets – A report to the Homelessness Directorate*, ODPM

¹⁶ (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office, *ibid*

Crisis response

Begging is for the most part non threatening and is mostly a passive activity¹⁷. Where it is accompanied by aggressive or violent behaviour there exist the legislative tools to tackle these problems.¹⁸

Research by the former Rough Sleepers Unit in 2001¹⁹ found that in a survey of members of the general public 52% said that they gave to beggars; specific questions about begging in the British Social Attitudes Survey showed that the majority of the public think that beggars genuinely need help. When asked how best to deal with the situation, more supportive policies such as access to housing education, training and employment, garnered the most enthusiasm. Less than a quarter of people feel that arresting people for begging in public is an appropriate response.

Little is known about the reasons why people beg with children and it is essential that the phenomenon is better understood if we are serious about tackling this problem. However research has shown that people who beg with dogs do so for a number of reasons including company and security²⁰ and it is misconceived to suggest that they simply use their pets as an aid to begging.

Making begging a recordable offence

“The government is addressing the underlying causes and tackling its persistent nature. The current offence of begging will be made recordable under the National Police Records (Recordable offences) Regulations 2000. This will make begging convictions a part of an individual’s criminal record and enable the police to keep track of persistent offenders.”

Crisis response

A recent report by the IPPR entitled *Them and Us* highlighted the potentially negative impact of a criminal conviction on an individual’s life chances and opportunities for social inclusion.²¹

Whilst Crisis welcomes attempts to tackle the underlying causes of begging, we are concerned that making a begging a recordable offence will burden an already vulnerable people with a criminal record creating a further obstacle to their reintegration into mainstream society.

Does enforced drug treatment work

“Appropriate sentencing needs to take account of the reasons why some people beg. The Criminal Justice Bill will provide sentences with a new power which will enable them to deal more effectively with persistent beggars. After two or more

¹⁷ “Most begging is passive, the person usually sitting with some form of cup or receptacle in front of them and sometimes a sign saying hungry and homeless”: DTLR (2001) *Looking for Change, The role and Impact of Begging on the Lives of People who Beg*, RSU, p49

¹⁸ Public Order Act, 1995

¹⁹ (2001) *Looking for Change The Role and Impact of Begging on the Lives of People who Beg* RSU p39

²⁰ (2001) *Looking for Change The Role and Impact of Begging on the Lives of People who Beg* RSU p49

²¹ Sparks, C. & Spencer, S. (2002) *Them and Us? The public, Offenders and the Criminal Justice System*, IPPR, p1

convictions, the court will be able to impose a community sentence, including drug treatment.²²

Crisis response

Crisis welcomes any attempt to ensure that sentencing takes into account why some people beg. However it is unlikely that enforced drug treatment will resolve the considerable drug misuse problems of people who beg. Good practice guidance on drug services for homeless people published by the Home Office, National Treatment Agency, Department of Health and the Homelessness Directorate, recognises that a move to detoxification and rehabilitation without adequate preparation can sometimes lead to failure for this group²³. It is clear that a period of stabilisation of often chaotic drug use within a supportive environment is more likely to lead to successful treatment.

Furthermore, research demonstrates that it is extremely difficult for homelessness agencies to access drug services for homeless people with multiple needs²⁴. The research found that only 0.3% of the 762 targeted bed spaces for multiple needs clients recorded in the survey were for detoxification. This demonstrates a clear mismatch between the high prevalence of drug misuse and the extremely low level of specialist provision within the homelessness sector.

The good practice guidance notes the importance of rapid access to detoxification and rehabilitation services where this is the best option for the client. The Government must be careful not to use enforced drug treatment on vulnerable people on the street, without first ensuring that there is a stepping stone approach involving harm minimisation before detoxification, and available services with speedy access.

5. Alternative solutions to begging

Crisis believes that as well as access to appropriate accommodation and alternative activities to street life, street homeless people require help to overcome drug and alcohol misuse, social isolation, mental and physical health problems, boredom and deep-seated low self-esteem.

Street homeless people and police officers have an interest in tackling victimisation, reducing reoffending and improving contact between themselves. For homeless people it is key to a safer less dangerous life. For police officers it reduces demand upon time and resources used formally processing homeless people for little benefit and it increases homeless people's access to a range of supportive services; this means that officers are able to deliver the kind of police service they prefer to deliver.²⁵

When asked what could be done to reduce offending the solutions proposed by homeless people placed greater emphasis on reducing the perceived need to offend rather than greater policing. One in three people who sleep rough are of the view that regular access to food and support services reduces offending. Just under one in three believe that having safe public areas where rough sleepers could gather at night or during the day would itself reduce offending. Two in three rough sleepers believe the key to improving contact with police lies in changes to the way police work. One in five think police officers

²² (2003) *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-social Behaviour*, Home Office, ibid

²³ Randall, G. & DrugScope (2002) *Drug services for Homeless People – A Good Practice Handbook*, London, ODPM

²⁴ Bevan, P. & van Doorn, A. (2001) "Fact or fiction? Supporting People with Multiple Needs", *Multiple Needs Good Practice Briefing*, London, Homeless Link

²⁵ Ballintyne, S. (1999) *Unsafe Streets– Street Homelessness and Crime*, IPPR, p73

should receive specialised training in working with people who sleep rough and one in seven believe police should set up a police homelessness unit to guide work with homeless people.²⁶

From the police perspective there are three major changes that would improve the current situation:

- 1) the provision of appropriate services at times that people need them
- 2) the provision of specialist services alongside police so the needs of some homeless people can be better addressed and
- 3) improved communication with other agencies to speed up contact and increase the possibility of early intervention.²⁷

6. Recommendations

1. **The provision of alternatives to street life:** this should include safe havens in public spaces, ensuring the availability of wet facilities for street drinkers, the development of easily accessible activities and employment opportunities that engage homeless people.
2. **Improving access to accommodation:** ensuring the availability of accessible, appropriate and if necessary supported accommodation.
3. **Specialist services:** the provision of appropriate care and social services, particularly detoxification facilities, at times when officers and rough sleepers need access e.g. at night.
4. **Develop multi-agency working:** this should include a review of existing policing practice including liaison and extending joint work and training between police and street homelessness agencies.

²⁶ Ibid p67

²⁷ Ibid p69



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