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Consultation Response – 'Proposed to prevent rough sleeping and the distribution of free refreshment (commonly known as soup runs) in a designated part of the Victoria area of the city.'

About the Simon Community¹

The Simon Community has been in operation since 1963 living and working with homeless people in London. It currently runs services almost every day of the year making contact with over 180 people on an almost daily basis. We are intimately connected to the lives of people sleeping rough and homeless in the capital through regular outreach work, our house of hospitality and our residential house. The Simon Community model has inspired innovation in others since its inception and we continue to pride ourselves on our independent and pioneering way of working. We run a number of outreach projects which involve giving food to rough sleepers and consider this an integral part of our work. Our work is rooted in love, compassion and being alongside people in need².

As we approach our 48th anniversary we continue to see a need for our services and voice which meets a need where no other provision exists.

Summary

The Simon Community is strongly **opposed** to both parts of the proposed byelaw on a number of practical, ethical and legal grounds. We are very upset that we have had to dedicate significant time and resources in defending our work in this way. We are also very concerned that this proposal represents a major undermining of the good work of the soup run forum and the Soup Runs Core Group. We would also like to underline that although a minority of homelessness agencies do support the proposal, the vast majority do not. This includes many others who are based in the proposed area and with a significant track record in homelessness work³. We also know that a number of residents, tourists, businesses (large and small) who use the area do not support the ban. We have collected a number of comments from those who were in the Westminster area and they are collated as an appendix to this document.

Our position

We are **opposed to the proposed byelaw to make sleeping rough an offense** in this part of Westminster and would be in any part of the UK. We consider this a completely disproportionate and wrong response to rough sleeping.

- If the proposal is made to reduce criminal activity, a raft of legislation exists to deal with begging, urinating in public places and begging. Further legislation is not needed.
- To punish those who sleep rough with a fine will likely just push them into the neighbouring borough rather than dealing with it.
- We do not accept the position that there are enough options for those sleeping rough, particularly in the face of widespread cuts to services⁴. We should acknowledge that, for a number of reasons, people return to or end up on the streets for legitimate reasons that are outside of their control.

¹ Simon Community is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. Registered charity number 283938.

² Our morning runs which work across Camden, Westminster and Lambeth see on average 105 people in one morning and our evening runs 138. These are averages over the last two years. The support offered is not just food but emotional support, practical advice and sign posting to services run by ourselves and others.

³ Notable opponents to the proposal include Homeless Link, the Passage, Crisis,

⁴ See a recent survey carried out by Homeless Link, the national umbrella body for homelessness agencies.

http://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/Counting%20the%20Cost%20of%20Cuts%20final_1.pdf

- We are concerned that this proposal is made with a motivation to 'clean up' this well visited area of Central London for tourists and some residents. From a moral standpoint, this is not the compassionate approach we should expect from publicly funded authorities. It also serves to create a climate of fear around people who sleep rough when the evidence suggests that they are far more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the 'housed'.
- We are concerned that the byelaw would represent a waste of Police time and would go un-enforced in the vast majority of cases.
- We refuse to accept that street homelessness should be treated as a crime. It is a symptom of wider societal problems and structures and individual responsibility have only one part to play.
- At a time when cuts are being made to other services, there will be a rise in those who end up sleeping rough. These people were not responsible for cuts in services and should not be criminalised for their actions.
- The proposed byelaw introduces a new crime of rough sleeping. This is not the normal route for introducing a new crime into the British legal system.
- We are extremely concerned at the potential for a 'domino effect' which could see this approach taken in other areas of the UK.

We are also **opposed to the proposed byelaw to the 'distribution of free refreshment'** in this part of Westminster.

- The arguments underpinning the proposal are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of our work in offering hospitality through food to rough sleepers. It is an outreach tool to help build and cement relationships with those which do not use other services (and some that do) and feeds our other work in supporting people.
- The arguments that provision of good nutrition and strong relationships are beneficial for wellbeing far outweigh any that suggest providing food 'sustains harmful street lifestyles'. We cannot accept that people will choose to sleep rough for a free sandwich
- We believe that offering hospitality on terms that people find acceptable is an essential part of belonging to a caring and compassionate society.
- We actively seek to reduce the impact of our services on residents and businesses and always make sure that we tidy up, encourage others to do so and choose locations that keep any disruption to a minimum.
- We run a mix of services both on the streets and at a number of buildings in London, including our own hospitality. We appreciate the need for this mix in response to the diversity of need in homeless and vulnerably housed people. Working on the streets and offering food is essential for us to reach out to a particular sector of extremely vulnerable people.
- Soup runs also fulfill a need which is not being met at the moment. Day centres are threatened with cuts (in the case of WCC's own funded centres) or closed in the case of Salvation Army at Rochester Row. There is a lack of support in the evenings.
- The Big Society agenda is about local people finding ways to support others in their community. This is the essence of what soup runs are about. As one commentator noted 'the Big Society is in danger of being strangled at birth'.

Conclusion

We reiterate that this proposal has diverted valuable resources, energy and time away from the real issues of how to help vulnerable people. It has undermined trust between the statutory, voluntary and community organisations when it is so desperately needed. It is morally, ethically and legally wrong to take these proposals forward. We are keen to explore the best way to ensure our services work with others to help rough sleepers. However, we are committed to opposing these proposals as long as they stand.

Appendix

Quotations from people collected on 20th March, 2011

People were asked to write their reaction to the proposed byelaw that would make rough sleeping and the distribution of free food illegal in this part of Westminster.

Comments from residents, tourists and visitors to Westminster

- Both being two females regularly visiting and working in the area we have never felt threatened by the homeless people in the area and feel that hiding the problem away is not the way to go. Victoria is a very 'touristy' area. Perhaps the council should focus more on helping people instead of trying to portray an untrue image of perfection for visitors.
- I have lived in Westminster for 11 years and I have never felt any fear or intimidation in regards to people who are sleeping rough. Government should leave these humans to get on with their work and if they want to help they should look at a more holistic approach. (Marie Morrison)
- This proposal is completely unjust and is not reflective of the community's wishes. Therefore it is not democratic.
- Feeding the hungry is a Christian duty and Westminster Council must not ban soup runs on the spurious reason that it encourages rough sleeping. As the government cuts bite deeper, homelessness will grow. We need creative solutions, not a ban on charity. (Jenny Jones, Greater London Assembly Member).
- I am against not being able to give food to the homeless. That impacts on my personal freedom. Also the fact that governments/local authority quietly pass laws and people don't even know about it.
- This byelaw is completely unjust and ridiculous! It goes against every human instinct! When did helping people become criminal? Instead of punishing those who are homeless, we need to support them and provide them with help and alternatives.
- There are far more important issues to deal with, there is no point wasting time on this ridiculous byelaw it should not be passed.
- Simply wrong. Homeless people need support, not prosecution. These proposals also seek to prosecute those who seek to help. How does this fit into the coalition's 'Big Society'? Who will fund the scheme? Who will enforce the scheme? What happens to those people that are homeless?
- I fully support the scheme (soup runs) as it offers hope and care for the homeless. As a London resident I am appalled by what the Council is trying in stopping this service. It is inhumane. Thank you.
- If Westminster Council want to bring in a byelaw restricting activities of the homeless and their supporters I would strongly oppose this. More resources are needed to help the homeless problem not less. Westminster (SW1V) resident.
- It's dreadful there's a shortage of food. It's degrading, people are just trying to survive. Westminster resident.
- As a London resident I feel the byelaw preventing the distribution of free food to the homeless is ridiculous. A proper scheme to re-house and rehabilitate the homeless should be implemented. We shouldn't prevent kind people from helping those who are hungry, homeless and in need. (Magda Kiros).
- There are better ways to improve the lot of homeless people that to withdraw access to free food for goodness sake!
- I am a tourist and I am not afraid of people living on the street. I think the government should help them and not punish them.

Comments from street homeless people

- I don't think the Byelaw can work. I'm homeless and have been in and out of prison. So will they send me back to prison for living on the streets? That will cost the Government thousands of pounds to do that. Why don't they find us accommodation so that we can get jobs. You can't get a job without accommodation. It is ridiculous what they are trying to do. We will stay and keep fighting this.

- This is a pretty despicable attack on both those the council has already failed and those trying to help them.
- It's a chance to help the people! Westminster Council just want to help the rich.. They should help the people on the streets.
- Have you asked the police what they think about the strong possibility of increased shoplifting and criminality in general through your policies? Further, do you intend to pay for the increase in man hours that will be incurred? Finally, you are wrong in using the police to enforce a policy that is social and not criminal. As a homeless person I wish to point out that I do not wait about waiting for a handout. It is also a myth when you say that there is enough housing to house the homeless. If so why am I still waiting after more than three years? It was not as if I woke up one morning and said to myself I will become homeless. Nor do I have a criminal record, mental health, drink or drug problem. I'm just a normal person.
- I would not like to see the ban, I get food here every day. (Polish man, currently homeless)
- Connections budget cut by 300,00, 10 jobs to be cut, no hot meals for people in the night shelter and two evenings cut from the programme and you're trying to criminalise sleeping rough. F**king ridiculous.
- Speaking from experience I really feel that the soup runs are a lifeline to those unfortunate enough to find themselves on the street with no-one who wants to help. I myself am one of the fortunate ones who, after doing a year in a West End hostel (which was worse than living on the streets in my opinion!) am now living in a training flat. So I hope the soup runs are allowed to continue their good work and give aid to those in need.
- Not a good thing (Polish man, currently homeless).
- Anyone can become homeless at any time. Even Westminster workers. How would you feel if you lost your house and then were fined for sleeping? And anyone who tried to help you by giving you food was fined as well? Let it be.
- I live on the streets out of choice, I just want to have the freedom of choice.
- If Westminster Council will enforce this so called law, some people will start shoplifting to feed themselves which will cause extra work for the police. They are unable to pay any fine. As for being arrested, they get a bed for the night, very smart thinking bone heads! Shame on you!
- Deal with the problem, don't send it somewhere else. How does shifting the problem solve it?
- The proposal from Westminster Council is something that usually happens in a non democratic country (A dictatorship) where it is easy to persecute, harass (operation poncho) or make life difficult and inhuman. In a country like the UK, this should and must not happen. We will find a way around their anti-social stupidity.

Comments from those also involved in providing services

- People are afraid of the homeless and they should not be. I have worked as a volunteer in a homeless shelter. They are ordinary people. Banning soup is just begging for someone to break the law and get fined or sent to prison. Think of all that lovely publicity for a homeless charity. Why do people have to regulate and control everything?
- Every religion expects the hungry to be fed and the homeless to be sheltered. This proposed law is against human rights.
- Westminster council. I am a volunteer that works with the homeless of London. I do street café every week and I see what it means to these people. It's not just a chance to eat but a chance to have an actual pleasant conversation with fellow homeless people and otherwise have some compassion.
- The new law will not solve the problem of homelessness.
- Clearly criminalising the homeless does not solve any kind of problem. Moreover, the criminalisation of a social category (i.e. the homeless) is very un democratic and reminiscent of feudal legal systems. Hurray for civil Britain!
- Think about others! THINK ABOUT OTHERS!
- DON'T BE STUPID! Let us help the people that need it!
- This proposal is ridiculous. It is outlawing empathy and kindness. Punishing people who want to feed the hungry is counter productive to any social progress. Westminster Council, be ashamed.

- Are you just stopping us from feeding the homeless because of the Olympics? Every country has homeless people and they need to be fed. (St John Vianney's Church. West Green Road, N15.)
- As long as there are homeless and hungry people we are going to feed them. Where are they going to get food from? Shame on Westminster.
- I think it is important that the many volunteer organisations are able to provide the soup run services – especially in Westminster where homelessness, poverty and hunger are most prevalent. It seems a good way to 'use up' a great amount of food that would normally be thrown away. Provides a regular point and place for many street people to get to know each other and keep an eye and offer support to one another. The meeting today mean that many individuals can show the need for this service, not just for sustenance but also for contact and friendship. As many people get to be victims of violence or fall foul of small gangs, regular runs help to also keep an eye on vulnerable people in London. Perhaps to help with refuse more bins or recycling units could be made available.