

Appendix Four: Crisis Skylight email and signatory list

“Dear Sirs

We are responding to this consultation as a group of organisations and individuals who work with homeless people or are concerned about homelessness in Oxford. We are sending this consultation response by email as we do not consider the tick boxes given on the online questionnaire to be sufficient to give our considered view on these important issues

Rough Sleeping

We are very concerned that, as part of the consultation on the new proposed Public Spaces Protection Order, Oxford City Council appears to be considering banning or further restricting rough sleeping. While we appreciate that no specific plans have been announced, we believe that any such policy would be particularly ill thought out and likely to be counter-productive.

We do appreciate that Oxford residents and businesses can experience problems from rough sleeping in the city centre. It is also to be welcomed that the reasons the council uses to defend their proposals include a commitment to outreach work and an acknowledgement that, wherever possible, rough sleepers should be supported into hostels and other services. However, we simply do not see how making rough sleeping a criminal offence will contribute to the council’s aim of ‘reducing rough sleeping to as near zero as we can achieve.’

We believe that any such ban or further restriction would be ill-conceived for the following reasons:

- Moving rough sleepers out of the designated area with the threat of criminal charges will only result in them moving to another location, which could include moving out of sight and away from services. It will not help them to resolve their homelessness, nor will it be a constructive way to encourage them to engage with services.
- Imposing fines on rough sleepers which they have no possible way of paying is an ultimately pointless exercise, and giving extremely vulnerable people a criminal record could jeopardise their chances of recovery.
- It is likely to antagonise a range of voluntary and statutory bodies which work with rough sleeping and will damage their relationships with Oxford City Council.
- The police and the council already have extensive powers to deal with any criminal and anti-social behaviour by rough sleepers, so new legislation is unnecessary.

We reject the notion that underpins this proposal and suggests that rough sleeping and particularly vulnerability is in some instance a “life style” choice - which needs enforcement action taken against it. We believe instead it is a situation which requires society and statutory and voluntary agencies to actively work together to engage the individuals involved as quickly as possible and then provide a holistic

package of support for as long as is necessary to help them out of homelessness and back into society.

We do not believe that criminalising the act of rough sleeping has any benefits at all for the individuals concerned, for the local community, for society at large or for any other statutory or voluntary agency working to tackle rough sleeping and help the individuals involved in Oxford.

‘Persistent’ begging

We are also concerned that, as part of the consultation on the new proposed Public Spaces Protection Order, Oxford City Council appears to be considering banning or further restricting begging.

We believe that such a ban on begging would be ill-conceived for the following reasons:

- People who beg are some of the most vulnerable in our society and begging is a sign of deeper rooted problems, including homelessness, mental health and addiction problems.
- Though there is little evidence or research available on the people who beg, we know that the majority sleep rough or live in hostels and night shelters.
- We do not condone aggressive or threatening behaviour. However, homeless people are actually more likely to be the victims of violent crime than the perpetrators – with homeless people 13 times more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the general public.

We are also unclear as to why the focus is on “persistent” begging—as begging may be persistent without being in any way aggressive or threatening. As with rough sleeping, we believe that banning begging could criminalise vulnerable people, lead to fines being levied which cannot be paid (except, perhaps, through further begging) and displace vulnerable people away from services which can support them. Ultimately, the solution lies in society and statutory and voluntary agencies to actively working together to engage the individuals involved as quickly as possible and then provide a holistic package of support for as long as is necessary to help them until their issues have been addressed and they no longer turn to begging.

Signed

Organisations

Crisis, Crisis Skylight Oxford, Aspire Oxford, Emmaus Oxford, Affordable Oxford, On Your Doorstep (Oxford University Students Union), The Gatehouse”

Subsequent additional organisations:

North Oxford Action Against Homelessness, The Big Issue Foundation, Homeless Link, Oxford Homeless Pathways