

**EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LEISURE SCRUTINY PANEL**

**12 SEPTEMBER 2016**

**STREET BEGGARS – SETTING THE SCENE AND ESTABLISHING TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Democratic Services Officer submitted a report to provide Panel Members with background information in relation to the new scrutiny topic of Street Beggars.

At its meeting on 11 July 2016, the Panel agreed to examine the topic “Street Beggars” as part of its 2016/17 work programme. It had been agreed that a short, sharp review on this topic would be undertaken and a round table discussion held.

An invitation had been extended to representatives from a number of organisations including R Jones (Cleveland Police), J Garner (Thirteen Housing) and R Beard (Community Safety Partnership & Neighbourhood Safety Team Manager – Middlesbrough Council). The areas of focus for the meeting were as follows:-

- How big a problem was Street Beggars in Middlesbrough?
- Do we have any figures on the number of Street Beggars currently / previously in the town and were the numbers increasing /decreasing?
- Was street begging in Middlesbrough linked to drug and alcohol misuse and / or homelessness?
- Was the No Second Night Out scheme in Middlesbrough proving effective?
- What approaches have been taken to date in an effort to help resolve this issue and were these approaches working?
- What other options are available to the Council / Police to ensure that local residents / businesses were not adversely affected by the behaviour of street beggars?

The Community Safety Partnership & Neighbourhood Safety Team Manager advised the panel that a multi-agency group comprising of representation from Middlesbrough Council, Thirteen Housing, Middlesbrough Recovering Together, Tees Valley Community Rehabilitation Company (TVCRC) and DePaul UK (Homeless Charity) met on a six weekly cycle to tackle the issue of town centre begging. The Panel was advised that nine prolific Street Beggars have been identified in Middlesbrough, although the group changes from time to time.

The majority of those identified had a heroin addiction, with alcohol addiction as a secondary issue. A few had Anti-Social Behaviour (ASBOs) Orders, including some for begging and others had ASBOs for causing ASB in other areas of the UK. The majority had poor mental health and all refused to work with services. It was explained that all had had numerous opportunities to access support including drug and alcohol treatment programmes. Their refusal to accept support was what set them apart from those that were willing to accept the help available. It was emphasised that anyone identified as sleeping rough in Middlesbrough is identified immediately and offered accommodation. It was important to differentiate between homeless people, who were willing to accept the support on offer and the Street Beggars. The door to services provided by Middlesbrough Recovering Together (MRT) was always open to help individuals to help themselves.

The panel queried why the Street Beggars refused the help that was readily available to them. It was explained that for up to a period of two months the Council would fully fund B&B accommodation through the Homeless Prevention Grant. After that period individuals were expected to pay for their own gas, electricity, and rent (top up) from the Housing Benefit they received. Unfortunately the Street Beggars were not prepared to spend any of their benefits on everyday living costs and begging could also be viewed as relatively lucrative. It was advised that the nine prolific Street Beggars in Middlesbrough were entitled to receive benefits including Housing Benefit and many had been assessed by the Department of Working Pensions (DWP). Their individual circumstances often meant they were receiving upwards of £2000 a month in benefits but were still choosing to generate

additional income by begging. It was acknowledged that many suffered from poor physical health, poor mental health and had often experienced abuse in childhood and these factors could not be downplayed.

Despite the public's misconception that the Street Beggars were homeless eight out of the nine identified all had accommodation. The one individual identified as having no fixed abode was known to be sofa surfing but was still in receipt of benefits. It was explained that this individual had been offered fully funded accommodation for a period of 2 months, followed by an offer of new B&B accommodation provided by 20/20. The offer included all utilities and breakfast for a small top up contribution of £20 per week. This was a fantastic offer and there was absolutely no reason for anyone to be begging in Middlesbrough. It was emphasised that the Street Beggars were not homeless. Many suffered from deep seated issues and would need to engage with services at some point.

Reference was made as to whether Middlesbrough had a relatively high / low number of Street Beggars relative to the town's population. It was acknowledged that at present this information was not known. However, the department had undertaken a piece of work with Brighton and Hove City Council, which had launched a hard hitting poster campaign to warn the public that giving money to Street Beggars was not a benign act without consequences. Charitable homeless organisations have seen many lives damaged by hard drugs and alcohol use. It was noted that the Council was not in favour of launching a hard hitting campaign in Middlesbrough and the preferred approach was the 'Think before you Give' campaign. It is widely acknowledged that given that a drop in income can stimulate people to address their real needs instead of avoiding facing them. It was confirmed that the Council's 'Think before you Give' campaign featured Shelter's contact information and if the general public wished to make a donation to a homeless charity the contact information was readily available.

The Community Safety Partnership & Neighbourhood Safety Team informed the panel that there had been a news feature on BBC Tees that morning on Street Beggars. The news reporter had interviewed one of Middlesbrough's prolific Street Beggars, who had confirmed he was in receipt of benefits and was not homeless. The news feature also contained an interview with a representative from Bridge House (a homeless charity in Stockton-On-Tees). The representative from Bridge House had advised that there were genuine homeless cases with people in real need of support. The Community Safety Partnership & Neighbourhood Safety Team advised that in Middlesbrough there were permanent accommodation places readily available. It was emphasised that Middlesbrough's approach is 'support first then enforcement' with the aim of helping people move on with their lives. Reference was made to a recent case of an individual that was in genuine need and was homeless. This individual had family links in to elsewhere in the country and over the last three to four months had successfully moved home and was currently accessing drug and alcohol treatment services.

An Inspector from Cleveland Police informed the panel that since June 2016 the Police have used Dispersal Orders to move the Street Beggars out of Middlesbrough town centre for a period of 48 hours. In addition each time the Street Beggars were approached by the Police, the Street Wardens or Neighbourhood Safety Officers they were provided with a list of all relevant support services they could access. On 27 July 2016 a multi-agency operation was undertaken, which included the homeless section at Thirteen Housing and the Drugs Action Team. This operation involved all agencies speaking directly to the Street Beggars in a co-ordinated effort to engage them in accessing support. It was also explained that in cases where prosecutions for breaches of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBO's) have been undertaken the individuals did not receive a custodial sentence. The panel queried whether the number of prolific beggars in Middlesbrough varied from time to time or whether the nine identified remained the same. The panel was advised that the multi-agency town centre action group had been meeting for a period of 18 months and generally the number of Street Beggars in Middlesbrough ranged from eight to 11. There was also a tendency for the numbers to decrease during the winter period, as it could be seasonal issue. Reference was made to other areas of the UK and the view was expressed that in certain towns and cities in the UK homelessness was a very visible issue.

The Police Inspector advised that from the Police's perspective the use of Dispersal Orders had proved effective. It was explained that the case previously referred to concerning the individual with family links in elsewhere in the country was a direct result of a recent Dispersal Order. The Order commenced on a Friday night, which provided the multi-agency team with the opportunity to move the

Street Beggars out of the town centre and into supported accommodation. The Dispersal Order was in place for a period of 48 hours, which enabled the team to speak to individuals over a number of days. It was emphasised that the current approach adopted in Middlesbrough was enforcement plus support and Dispersal Orders had been used in June and July 2016.

Reference was made to the Street Beggars using musical instruments and whether they required a licence to busk. It was confirmed that a licence was needed and that a couple of the Street Beggars had obtained a licence. It was queried whether the licence needed to be displayed and if all buskers were given an allocated spot in the town centre. It was confirmed that this information would be obtained from the licensing department.

The panel queried whether it was felt that Middlesbrough needed to take a tougher stance on this issue and consider the use of Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs), as these have been used in other areas of the UK to deter Street Begging. The view was expressed collectively by the Council, Police and Thirteen that it was not necessary to introduce such a measure in Middlesbrough. It was advised that there was a need to balance support and enforcement and where support has proved ineffective enforcement action was taken. Three Criminal Behaviour Orders were currently in place, which enabled the multi-agency group to specify that they do not want a particular individual in a certain exclusion area.

It was reiterated that the multi-agency group was also undertaking other generic actions to reduce Street Begging in Middlesbrough. This included improved lighting, CCTV and liaising closely with the needle exchange to encourage the Street Beggars to access services. Reference was made to the 'No Second Night Out' scheme and it was confirmed that Middlesbrough has a reputation for providing good services, which meant there was a tendency for people to gravitate to Middlesbrough from other areas, especially in winter. The 'No Second Night Out' scheme was proving very effective with either accommodation or train tickets back to the individual's local area provided.

The panel was impressed by the level of support available and the multi-agency working arrangements in place. The Police Inspector advised that from the Police's perspective these cases were handled very sensitively. However, the public's perception that the Street Beggars were homeless was misguided. The point was made that most people sleeping rough do not beg and most people begging do not sleep rough. It was noted that an enforcement led approach had been tried previously whereas the current approach was more supportive i.e. helping people to help themselves. It was acknowledged that the Street Beggars often lead a very transient lifestyle and eventually do accept help. It was also confirmed that the majority of the Street Beggars in Middlesbrough are passive and their behaviour was not aggressive.

**AGREED** as follows:-

1. That the Chair be invited to a forthcoming meeting of the Street Beggars town centre Action Group.
2. That the public information campaign to encourage people to 'Think before you Give' be more widely promoted and advertised in the town centre.
3. That information be obtained from the Licensing department as to whether buskers could be required to display their licences.