

Soup Run & Rough Sleeping Byelaws

Frequently Asked Questions

Soup Runs

There will be hungry people who will have no access to food if soup runs are banned, what will happen to these people - will they be left to starve?

- No one will be left to starve on the streets. Many of those using soup runs in the Victoria area are not rough sleepers and some are actually working. The most needy and vulnerable rough sleepers tend not to use soup runs because they are afraid of the crowds and can be bullied. The latter group will continue to be targeted by the outreach workers and the day centre teams to ensure they are nourished and receive ongoing offers of suitable accommodation.
- Two Soup runs are now running their services indoors, 3 – 4 evenings per week in the Victoria area, providing a very successful service including providing hot meals, friendship, resettlement support and IT skills. The indoor space has been offered free of charge to other soup run providers.
- Soup runs are feeding people who travel from areas across London to receive their food in Victoria and it would be much more compassionate and appropriate to offer their services within their own local communities.
- Soup Runs are not being banned from the whole of Westminster. This measure is being taken in a particular area which suffers disproportionately from the negative local effects of soup runs.

Why are you only attempting to regulate Soup Runs in a particular area?

- We are responding to complaints about the overprovision and duplication of soup runs coming into the Victoria area. These complaints are current and long standing. They are made by residents and businesses.
- There is indisputably overprovision in that area. Three soup runs have been observed providing food in the same street at the same time to the same group of people.
- Large concentrations of people gather within the proposed designated area waiting for the soup run of their choice. They gather early on and around the Cathedral Piazza and we have evidence that this is intimidating local residents and visitors to the area

- Upon departure the litter and other related detritus is unacceptable and again distressing for local residents who feel their community is being blighted.

What is wrong with charitable feeding of people on the streets?

- It is unacceptable in the twenty first century to be handing out food on the streets in such an undignified and uncaring manner.
- There are other more appropriate options which respect the right to human dignity.
- Within Westminster there is a complex and comprehensive response to meet the needs of those living or sleeping on the streets. This response does not include facilitating a life style that damages health and can lead to premature death
- Facilities should be made available within the community that the users of soup runs are travelling from. Charitable responses should not become a post code lottery

Is the charitable volunteering of soup run providers not exactly what the Government's 'Big Society' is aiming to capture?

- Local organisations responding to the needs of socially deprived, excluded, individuals and groups within their own community is to be applauded. However, this charitable and humanitarian response needs to be provided within 'home' communities to ensure the response is applicable to local need. Current provision of food on the streets in Westminster actually encourages people to sleep rough in Central London, with all the dangers that entails.

What are the negative effects for local communities that you mention?

- Some residents are too fearful to walk along certain streets because they are intimidated by the crowds loitering in advance of and after the soup runs have left. In the main these are male between the ages of 30 to 50years who are frequently loud and intimidating.
- Street urination and worse is not an uncommon sight
- Aggressive arguments and fighting, often related to substance misuse including alcohol, are regularly witnessed and create fear and intimidation
- Noise and disturbance is experienced and witnessed by local residents from both inside and outside their homes.
- Associated litter and detritus is a constant eyesore

- Encouraging individuals to travel into a residential area leads to an increase in anti social behavior hot spots, including: low level crime, street drinking, begging, nuisance and disturbance

Are local residents, supported by the Council, just engaging in NIMBY-ism?

- All Westminster residents are entitled to reside in a local community that is not blighted by fear of anti social behaviour. Residents should not have to make detours to avoid walking a particular route because of fear of intimidation.
- Local rough sleeping service providers support the views of residents in this regard as soup runs reduce the incentive for individuals to engage with their services, which are able to offer a much more comprehensive and meaningful range of support services than simply free food.

Why have the Council resorted to such a draconian measure? What other options have been pursued?

- The City Council along with the London Mayor and major key third sector agencies have consistently promoted alternative volunteering opportunities that would directly benefit the street homeless. Unfortunately take up of these alternative options has not been great.
- Anti social behaviour enforcement options available to the police and the Council have been proved to be unsatisfactory – hence this application for a specific byelaw.
- We do not regard treating human beings with respect and dignity to be draconian. All human-beings should be entitled to sit and eat food in comfort rather than on a street corner. The latter is outmoded and unnecessary
- We are also of the view that providing food on the streets can and does sustain an individual's rough sleeping lifestyle. This lifestyle is proven to be one that shortens life expectancy and leads to premature death.

What about economic migrants who may not be entitled to benefits, how are they supposed to live?

- If people are in this country to find work the chances of them moving off the streets and into employment are very slim. Any interventions that sustain these people on the streets are therefore colluding with unrealistic aspirations. Interventions from the street need to be into accommodation or back to home countries

What about migrants who are not entitled to benefits, where can they get food?

- Economic migrants came to this country to work, if they are sustained in a street based lifestyle then their lives rapidly deteriorate to the point where working is completely unrealistic and then they are potentially trapped on the streets. If an economic migrant finds themselves in a position where they have nowhere to go other than the streets then the only realistic course open to them is to return home – the alternative is a life of destitution. We will help people return home, where individuals will have greater resources to obtain the support they require.

What about destitute migrants who are not able to return to their home country?

- There are some people who have complex circumstances; we will work with those people and the relevant agencies to identify a sustainable solution that would ensure they were not stuck on the streets.

Rough Sleeping

Shouldn't people be able to choose to sleep wherever they like?

- In most cases yes but we know from years of experience that there are areas where people sleep rough that attract other people to sleep on the street. The bigger these groups become the more difficult it is for people to move on and people become stuck on the street.

Rough Sleeping is a national problem. Why are you concentrating on this particular area?

- The Cathedral Piazza and surrounding streets in South Westminster are historically magnet areas for rough sleeping. They have, over the years, contained the largest hotspots (concentrations of rough sleepers in one place) in the country. This places an intolerable burden upon the local resident and business community. There is no reason why this area should be such a magnet area for rough sleepers – in fact, services from commissioned providers are frequently withdrawn from clients who persist in sleeping in these areas. Apart from the attraction of soup runs, it is likely that there is an historic attraction inherent to the area and that people head for Victoria because they are aware that it is a traditional rough sleeping hotspot area. The local community should not have to put up with that problem simply because it always has.

Surely local residents, supported by the council, are engaging in NIMBY-ism?

- The City Council and our partners are committed to reducing rough sleeping to as near zero as we can achieve. We are not ashamed of this and should not have to defend this humanitarian ambition which will reduce premature deaths and mend broken lives.
- Yes, local residents are fed up with what has been occurring on their streets for years but they are not being NIMBYs. The Passage Day centre and several rough sleeping hostels are located in the area and these resources are provided to enable individuals to get the appropriate assistance and treatments needed to get their lives back on track and to end their rough sleeping lifestyle. There is no need for extra, unlicensed and uncontrolled provision on the street.

Are the City Council attempting to cleanse the streets prior to the Olympics?

- The City Council and its key third sector partners have for a decade worked tirelessly to assist and encourage individuals to leave a rough sleeping life style and accept appropriate offers of accommodation. This work would continue whether the Olympics was coming to London or not. This byelaw will regulate

soup runs and rough sleeping in a relatively small part of a borough which is itself only a small geographical part of London. The motives for this byelaw are simply to help vulnerable individuals off the streets, as well as the particular local community who have had to suffer the aforementioned issues for too long.

Rough Sleepers are vulnerable individuals. Why are you seeking to criminalise them?

- We are not seeking to criminalise anyone but are seeking powers to enforce a change in behavior and more realistic individual considerations of the alternatives to sleeping on the streets.
- The outreach teams will continue to target the most vulnerable who for a variety of complex reasons find it difficult to accept offers of assistance and accommodation. This will continue to be the main thrust of their work. Vulnerable individuals will not be enforced against, and all individuals will be asked to leave the area before being subjected to any enforcement that might lead to criminalisation.

Are there enough vacancies to accommodate those sleeping rough in the designated area?

- Westminster has over 1000 hostel bedspaces for former rough sleepers. There are a myriad of initiatives being undertaken to ensure that everyone that comes onto the street has a reasonable and tailored offer to get them away from the streets as quickly as possible. Only a very small proportion of the people that end up on the streets of Westminster require hostel accommodation in Westminster – most are encouraged and assisted to return to their home area.

People often remark that hostels are dangerous and not suitable for everyone. Why should people be forced into such environments?

- Within Westminster we have a wide ranging specialist accommodation pathway. If people have had a bad experience in the past that doesn't mean that there isn't the right hostel out there for them. Westminster is an excellent local authority where it comes to commissioning of hostel accommodation and has gone to great lengths to ensure that where people need specialist accommodation and support this is available for them. Hostels are monitored closely to ensure that the service they offer is as good as it can be, and regular inspections are carried out. The Council are confident that all the hostels that it commissions are well managed and able to assist individuals with a vast range of complicated support needs.

The designated area is characterized by wealth. Are you seeking to drive rough sleeping to poorer areas?

- No. We are seeking to resolve an intolerable situation that has resulted in residents feeling unsafe to walk down certain streets, intimidated by street drinking and fed up of the exposure to the associated detritus. The Council is attempting to minimise behavior that would not be acceptable in any area across the City of Westminster.

Many people are banned from services. What about them?

- Very few individuals are banned from services for any substantial length of time. Where bans are issued it is for good reason (threats, violence to staff or peers), and bans are reviewed regularly. It is clearly vital that this facility is available to services as otherwise day centres and hostels would become impossible to manage. Outreach teams will continue to work with clients during periods when they might be banned from services, and can ensure that individuals do not go without food at any time.

Do you not already have sufficient powers to deal with anti social behaviour?

- No, the powers that we do have involve a protracted legal process that would often require the individual to engage in a longstanding body of anti-social behavior before anything could be done. Above and beyond standard criminal behaviour, there is legislation that can be used to target street drinking or misbehaviour from groups of people. However, this legislation has been proven to be unsatisfactory in dealing with the particular problems that are presented by some rough sleepers and soup runs in this particular area, hence the application for a byelaw.

What services are available for rough sleepers in the area?

- The Passage Day Centre on Carlisle Place is a fully funded, voluntary sector run day centre which provides a wide range of services to rough sleepers and the insecurely housed. This includes basic food, shelter and cleaning facilities, but extends to qualified professional help for people's range of support needs. This includes physical and mental health professionals, employment and training workers, assistance with benefits and other finances, and specialist accommodation workers who will work to find the best accommodation outcome for each individual.
- The Passage have an outreach team who work with individuals on the street to encourage them to come indoors.

- There are other street based teams who work in the area with individuals whose behaviour is of concern for one reason or another. The St Mungo's Street Population Team work with clients who are not necessarily rough sleepers but who are engaged in street behaviour of one sort or another. The HARRT (Homeless Arrest and Reachout Team) work with rough sleepers with a significant criminal history, ensuring that their behaviour is minimized as far as possible and protecting the local community.
- There are a number of hostels for rough sleepers in the area, and rough sleepers in the Victoria area can be referred to hostels across Westminster if that is seen as the most appropriate accommodation outcome for them. In addition, there is funding available to help people access the Private Rented Sector, and there are other resources (i.e Sheltered accommodation, council accommodation with floating support) that is accessed where appropriate.