UK local authorities crack down on the homeless

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Local officials in Britain have responded to the growth of social destitution resulting from continued mass unemployment and cuts to social spending with sweeping efforts to crack down on the homeless population.

Earlier this the Labour Party-led Manchester City Council banned homeless people from setting up any form of temporary accommodation anywhere in the centre of the city.

Six men and one woman appeared in court in October, accused of breaking the injunctions brought by Manchester City Council and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). The case ended up being thrown out of court on procedural grounds, but the injunctions are still in place.

The ruling follows a long-running battle between the Manchester City Council and a growing number of homeless people who have set up tents around the Manchester city centre.

Some of those named in the latest court action had been living underneath the Mancunian Way flyover on land leased by MMU on Oxford Road, a main thoroughfare into the city centre. The defendants insisted that they had done nothing wrong, claiming that they were not protesting, but were living on the streets as comfortably as they could.

The group of homeless people sheltered in the spot, dubbed "The Ark", had portable toilets, camp beds and furniture that had been donated by the public. A sign out front declared "This is not a protest".

The public have been sympathetic to the plight of those living at The Ark, and a group of 50 students at MMU staged a protest calling for an end to the social cleansing of Oxford Road by the university. Sixty-nine staff at the university signed a letter along the same lines.

Ben Taylor, a solicitor acting for some of the homeless in Manchester recently commented, "Manchester City Council should ask, 'why are there so many homeless people on the streets,' rather than stopping them occupying certain bits of land. The problem will not just go away."

Draconian measures are being used against the homeless throughout the UK. The use of Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) is on the rise across the UK. They are also being used by Labour-controlled Cheshire West and Chester Council to deal with rough sleepers living on the streets of Chester. Chester is an historical tourist town situated 35 miles from Manchester.

One of the main architects of Chester's PSPO, Chief Inspector Jez Taylor, a partnership officer with Cheshire police, justified its use in the following terms. "Chester is one of the best preserved medieval walled cities in the United Kingdom. Its Roman heritage and many assets including the cathedral, the walls, the racecourse, the zoo and the river... a PSPO will ... improve the image of the city centre."

PSPOs were introduced in 2014 ostensibly to give councils more powers to deal with anti-social behaviour. They replaced the already restrictive Designated Public Spaces Orders. The new orders allow the authorities to disperse people where "activities carried on *or likely to be carried on* in a public place will have or have had a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality". [emphasis added]

An order can also include a public highway, and a local authority applying for one is only required to "consider … the availability of a reasonably convenient alternative route."

Up until recently, PSPOs have mainly targeted street

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drinking, but now they will include activities such as busking and the taking of "legal highs" in public. In Chester the proposed PSPO will also include making it a criminal offence to "feed any bird" in the defined area.

In June, the Labour-run Hackney council in east London had to back down after attempting to introduce a PSPO against those sleeping rough in some areas of the borough. The council intended to issue £100 fixed penalty notices or take those targeted to court. This led to homelessness charities and local campaigners speaking out against what was considered the criminalising of vulnerable people. More than 80,000 people signed a petition and the campaign received support from the musician Ellie Goulding, who accused Hackney council of "treating homeless people like criminals."

Connor Johnston, a barrister living in Hackney specialising in homelessness, said he was concerned by the council's decision to use a PSPO in this way, and that the move was "redolent of the Vagrancy Act of 1824", which criminalises begging.

"The purpose of these orders is to clamp down on antisocial or nuisance behaviour that impacts on the quality of life of those in the locality. There is nothing inherently antisocial about a person being forced to sleep rough and we should not be criminalising it," he said.

In October, Labour-run Oxford City Council voted to adopt a PSPO. This followed 72,000 people signing a petition opposing the measures and civil liberties organisation Liberty issuing a legal challenge.

In response, the council made a number of largely cosmetic concessions and passed the measure. Rosie Brighouse, Legal Officer for the Liberty campaign group said, "While we're pleased with the Council's concessions, it shouldn't have taken Liberty and other campaigners to force them to see how draconian their initial proposals were—they should never have been considered in the first place. However, we remain deeply concerned that the PSPO will criminalise the city's most vulnerable, and are considering whether it can be challenged in court."

Also last month, a homeless man, Christopher Clinton Wilkinson, was hauled before magistrates in Doncaster, south Yorkshire and prosecuted for sleeping rough in woodland surrounding a local hospital.

The 40-year-old man had been suffering with mental health problems and had not been receiving help from mental health services, or had any medication.

This was the second time Wilkinson had been arrested after being found in the grounds of St Catherine's Hospital, after struggling to find accommodation.

Representatives from the Doncaster-based charity, The M25 Housing and Support Group, said using anti-social behaviour legislation to criminalise people sleeping rough was a "significant concern."

The legal measures being increasingly resorted to deal with those found rough sleeping and begging is a sign of the times. Repressive measures are being used to persecute those suffering from poverty homelessness and other social ills created by capitalism.

Writing in his blog in October, Sir Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester City Council, claimed that 80 percent of people begging in the city were not homeless and went as far as saying, the conditions in the city were "so generous that we've had at least one example of somebody commuting from London to beg on our streets."

No slander against the homeless was big enough, with Leese continuing, "I suspect that most people who give to beggars think the money is going to pay for food and shelter when the most likely beneficiaries are the nearest… drug dealer."

Despite this demonization of the homeless, Leese was forced to acknowledge "homelessness is a serious and growing problem not just in Manchester but across the country. Lack of affordable housing, welfare cuts, and cuts to support services have all fuelled this growth…"

Yet, as with every other Labour authority across the UK, the Manchester city council has imposed every single austerity measure and welfare cut demanded by the government, leading to an enormous growth in poverty and homelessness.

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