

UK local authorities escalate anti-homelessness policies

Barry Mason
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At the sharp end of homelessness are rough sleepers, those sleeping on the street. The latest official figures published in January show a rise in those sleeping rough for the seventh year in a row. The figures collated in autumn last year showed 4,751 people sleeping rough, up by 15 percent on the previous year and over twice as many as in 2012.

This figure, while only a snapshot, expresses the upward trend in rough sleeping. Many of those working with the homeless regard the figure as a gross underestimate. The Chain database, maintained by St. Mungo's homelessness charity, reckoned there were over 8,000 sleepers in London alone according to figures produced for the year 2016-17.

Those on the street are subject to official harassment with measures taken to make their lives as uncomfortable as possible.

In 2015, Bournemouth council used piped bagpipe music to deter people from sleeping in the coach station overnight. In January, a 66-year-old man known only as Kev was found dead under a flyover in Bournemouth. A friend of his accused the council of taking away his sleeping bag shortly before he was found dead. A January 23 *Metro* article on the issue quoted local homeless charity founder Clair Matthews: "We give out sleeping bags to homeless people and we've been told by some of them the council has removed them to clean up the streets."

Public Sector Build Journal, a magazine for architects and other professionals working in the area of public space building and furniture, published an article in October last year, "How local councils are deterring the homeless from sleeping rough in the public realm." It notes, "Rough sleepers are seen as the human form of litter within a space."

It explains how benches are specifically designed to

deter rough sleepers. Central armrests are often considered to make sleeping on benches a problem. Furthermore, angled perches at bus stops discourage "hanging out," metal spikes on ledges and doorways scream "do not sit," "do not stand," and "go away."

Taking a leaf out of the book of anti-social policies imposed by politicians in control of US cities, local authorities in the UK are buying one-way tickets to move the homeless to other areas in what amount to a policy of social cleansing.

Following an 18-month investigation, the *Guardian* published an article in December revealing a database of over 34,000 such journeys in the US. "People are routinely sent thousands of miles away," it noted, "after only a cursory check by authorities to establish they have a suitable place to stay once they get there. Some said they feel pressured into taking tickets, and others described ending up on the streets within weeks of their arrival."

A BBC *Victoria Derbyshire* news analysis programme aired last October highlighted the extent of the use of buying one-way tickets for homeless people in the UK. The programme approached the 20 English local authorities with the highest number of rough sleepers, in some cases using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Of the 11 responding, 10 confirmed they had made purchases of such tickets since 2012.

Manchester City Council told the programme it has spent nearly £10,000 on buying one-way tickets for homeless people to return to their "home" area. Bristol City Council had offered one-way travel tickets to nearly 170 homeless people over the last three years. Exeter City Council reported spending over £4,500 on over 100 rough sleepers in the last 30 months.

The use of such tickets is justified on the basis that they enable homeless people to reconnect with their

own area. However, a rough sleeper in Bournemouth told the programme that although he had lived in Bournemouth all his life, he was offered a ticket to Manchester. He thought the council was trying to move out homeless people to make the area more attractive.

Speaking to Derbyshire, Claire Matthews, who runs a soup kitchen in Bournemouth, described the practice of buying one-way tickets as a form of “social cleansing and an abdication of any responsibility on [the council’s] part.”

Manchester City council defends the policy of buying one-way tickets. In a statement to ITV’s *Granada Reports*, Deputy Council Leader Cllr Bernard Priest said: “For some people, who want to go back to their home town or city where they have a connection to family and friends, we offer support and—only with their agreement—we will offer to buy a train ticket home as many don’t have the means to do this.”

The growing use of buying one-way tickets is an expression of the failure of the authorities to tackle homelessness.

The overall homelessness figure in the UK is on the increase. Housing charity Shelter’s latest report on homelessness was published last November and found there were 307,000 people in Britain classed as homeless—a rise of 4 percent over the previous year. Across the country one in 200 are homeless but some areas are especially hard hit. In the London borough of Newham the figure is one in 25, while it is one in 59 for the city as a whole. Other areas where the figures are high include Luton, Birmingham and Manchester.

Shelter found that the number in temporary accommodation awaiting a permanent home had gone up by 43 percent over the last seven years. Explaining why it was an increasing problem the report concluded: “The single leading cause of homelessness is the loss of a private tenancy. ... The number and proportion of households presenting as homeless due to the loss of a private tenancy has soared since cuts to housing benefit began in 2011.”

Also on the increase is the practice of placing homeless households in temporary accommodation, outside their home area. A BBC *Radio 5* broadcast showed the numbers placed in temporary accommodation outside their local area had risen by 59 percent over the last five years.

A parliamentary research briefing found “79,190

households in temporary accommodation at the end of September 2017. This marks the twenty-fifth time that the number of households in temporary accommodation has risen compared with the same quarter of the previous year. The 79,190 households include 121,360 children, representing a 73 percent increase since 2010.”

With a figure of 1,143, the London Borough of Southwark had placed the highest number of households outside their area over the last year. In that period, the London Borough of Harrow had moved people out to Bradford, Wolverhampton and Glasgow.

Following the recent announcement that the marriage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle would be taking place in Windsor in May, the leader of the town’s Conservative council, Simon Dudely, made clear his attitude to the town’s homeless. He wrote to Thames Valley Police to ascertain how they could prevent “aggressive begging and intimidation” by homeless people and how they could stop “bags and detritus” accumulating on the streets. This was followed up by threats of fines of £100 to any homeless person refusing to engage with statutory homelessness services. In addition, the council fitted benches in the town with metal bars to deter rough sleepers.

Living on the streets is a very precarious existence, reducing life expectancy to 47 years compared to 81 years for the average person in the UK. An example of its consequences was a homeless man in his 40s from Portugal, who was found dead in Westminster underground railway station in the shadow of the UK Houses of Parliament. Commenting on his death, Pam Orchard, chief executive of the London homelessness charity Connection, said he would be one of dozens of homeless people expected to die on the streets this year.



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