

Crisis response to Petitions Committee on 'hostile architecture'

June 2019

Key points

- People who are rough sleeping face a struggle to survive against weather, risks to their health, and a greater likelihood of being abused or victims of anti-social behaviour.
- Informal 'enforcement' against people rough sleeping is common and more widespread than formal enforcement measures by police or local authorities. Informal measures include being moved on, facing 'hostile architecture' and 'designing-out', or the 'wetting down' of sleeping areas.
- Enforcement activity of any kind without any offer of support can push people further away from sources of help. The best way to help people rough sleeping is to provide rapid support and rehousing; and to prevent people being in the situation in the first place.

Recommendations

1. 'Hostile/defensive' architecture is one of a number of informal ways that people who are rough sleeping are moved on. This approach does not address the root causes of a person's situation and can push people further away from sources of support or into more dangerous places or situations. It also reflects poorly on society's treatment of some of our most vulnerable citizens. Instead, **local areas should invest in what works: providing multi-agency support and suitable housing to rapidly help people away from the streets.**
2. **Concerned members of the public or businesses should be encouraged to use the Streetlink service to link people rough sleeping to support services.** Enforcement agencies, and police in particular, are limited in the support they can provide to help a person away from the streets and should only be called to deal with emergencies or anti-social behaviour that is causing genuine alarm, distress or harm to the community.

The harms of rough sleeping

- People sleeping rough are almost 17 times more likely to be victims of violence and 15 times more likely to have suffered verbal abuse compared to the wider public. The majority (53%) of instances are unreported to the police with the main reason for not reporting being an expectation that nothing would be done as a result.¹
- Between 2012 and 2017 the number of people who died while homeless in England and Wales increased by almost a quarter (24%).²
- In Wales more people presenting to their local authority for homeless assistance had mental (and physical) health problems than the broader population.³

Use of 'informal' enforcement, including 'hostile architecture'

- Mark, who sleeps rough, said: "I find all benches... They're always either curved in the middle so they raise up, or they're slanted so yeah, to be honest like it's hard to find a bench to sleep in. And if you can, they're not comfortable anyway and then as you said any wall areas, yeah, you know, you got those little metal circle bits on or little spikes."⁴
- A Crisis survey (2017) found that 1 in every 5 local authorities in England and Wales intended to use further 'defensive/hostile' architecture in the future.⁵
- 92 per cent of people on the streets in England and Wales said to a Crisis survey they have experienced informal measures against them, such as being challenged or 'moved on'.⁶ Informal measures can be a response to calls for action from local businesses or members of the public and are an attempt to deal with anti-social behaviour more generally. People sleeping rough are sometimes considered part of this despite the evidence that this approach does little to help people away from the streets.⁷
- Any enforcement activity that is not combined with an offer of support can displace people physically to other locations, potentially further away from support services and also make people feel more lonely and isolated.⁸

¹ Sanders, B. and Albanese, F. (2016), *"It's no life at all"- Rough sleepers' experiences of violence and abuse on the streets of England and Wales*. London: Crisis.

² Office for National Statistics (2018), *Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2013 to 2017*.

³ Cymorth (2017), *Health Matters – the health needs of homeless people in Wales*, Cardiff: Cymorth, p.6

⁴ Sanders, B. and Albanese, F. (2017), *An examination of the scale and impact of enforcement interventions on street homeless people in England and Wales*, London: Crisis, p. 23

⁵ Ibid. p.19

⁶ Sanders, B. and Albanese, F. (2017), *An examination of the scale and impact of enforcement interventions on street homeless people in England and Wales*. London: Crisis, p.34

⁷ Sanders, B. and Albanese, F. (2017), *An examination of the scale and impact of enforcement interventions on street homeless people in England and Wales*. London: Crisis, p.17

⁸ Sanders, B., & Albanese, F. (2017), *An examination of the scale and impact of enforcement interventions on street homeless people in England and Wales*. London: Crisis, p.35

Other evidence shows that enforcement without support can also lead to 'activity displacement', whereby people engage in potentially riskier behaviour like shoplifting or street-based sex work to survive and meet their needs.⁹

The state of debate on street homelessness

While not directly linked to the use of enforcement, Crisis is very concerned about the state of discussion in the public domain about rough sleeping and wider homelessness. We worked late last year with Shelter Cymru to jointly publicise our concerns.¹⁰

Particularly, we are concerned that the discussion can miss the causes and solutions of homelessness; and not safeguard the value and human dignity of people forced to sleep rough, including by some people in positions of authority.

There are some good examples of media coverage and political discussion¹¹ but also some bad examples, including:

- Use of 'the homeless' as a type/class of person rather than 'people who are (experiencing) homelessness' and dehumanised discussion about 'homeless tents' rather than people.
- Senior local elected politicians talking about sleeping rough as a 'lifestyle choice'¹² or saying individual rough sleepers are responsible for their situation because there is 'no need to sleep rough'.

What works to end rough sleeping

- Evidence is clear that the best way to end rough sleeping is to prevent it as much as possible and to provide mainstream housing as early as possible together with support to help someone rebuild their life.
- A review for Crisis of what works to end rough sleeping specifically found the following five themes feature in successful approaches:¹³

⁹ Johnsen, S (2016), Enforcement and interventionist responses to rough sleeping and begging: opportunities, challenges and dilemmas, ESRC, p.3

¹⁰ Crisis and Shelter Cymru (2018), Call for councils to change their approach to begging, <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/crisis-and-shelter-cymru-call-for-councils-to-change-begging-approach/>

¹¹ WalesOnline (5 February 2019), The complex set of reasons why homelessness in Wales is more visible than ever, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/complex-set-reasons-homelessness-wales-15769048>

¹² BBC Wales News online (5 May 2018), Cardiff rough sleepers are making 'lifestyle choices', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-44012807>

¹³ Mackie, P., Johnsen, S. and Wood, J. (2017) *Ending rough sleeping: what works? An international evidence review*. London: Crisis.

- Recognising the individual needs people have for housing and support.
- Swift action to prevent or quickly end homelessness through proven approaches.
- Assertive outreach leading to suitable accommodation offers.
- Offering rapid access to settled housing, including the use of the Housing First approach for some people.
- Offering person-centred support and choice and ensuring access to wider support, such as mental health, substance use etc.