

The Prostituting of the Homeless in Manchester

Over the last few years I have been perplexed by the constant hindrance of well-intentioned individuals who are convinced they are helping the homeless in Manchester, but in fact are a part of the problem.

I will go even further than the above statement and say that some business owners are consciously exploiting the homeless for personal gain. Wow, really!

Can this be true? Allow me to explore a slightly different view of things in Manchester. As with all my articles, I am only speaking about Manchester.

We have some Manchester 'commercial enterprises' who portray themselves as part of the solution and seemingly give customers an easy way to help the homeless and be part of the solution:

- coffee shops who allow customers to buy an extra coffee to leave behind the counter for a homeless person
- buy a beanie hat and a homeless person gets one for free
- buy a pair of antibacterial socks and a homeless person gets a pair for free
- the pub that opens on Christmas Day to make dinners for the homeless for free
- the local newspaper that constantly has 'feel good homeless' articles

All of the above sounds great and automatically make us think that these businesses are socially conscious and caring, surely their involvement is beneficial!

- Coffee Shop: First of all, a coffee has never helped a homeless person to get off the streets; if a free hot drink was any part of the solution then we would not have a problem in Manchester. Fact. We have never met a homeless person yet who would go into a coffee shop and ask if there was a free coffee for him. Why is the second coffee full price? Not half price, not at cost, but full price. A great example of how you can maximise your sales and therefore your profit with no extra work or cost.
- Beanie Hats & Socks: you can buy a hat or 5 socks in Primark for a £1. Why would anyone want to spend nearly £10, even if one is given to a homeless person? People don't need hats, they need homes. This is a great example of linking your product to a popular cause and then selling like crazy, oh by the way; also ensuring you make a profit on every sale and generate free publicity.
- Pub Christmas Lunch: this was a great PR success. A city centre pub gets almost a full page in the Manchester Evening News highlighting their generosity to the homeless. After Christmas they get another page in the newspaper updating the success of the event. Do you know how much it would cost to get a full page advert in the Manchester Evening News? It will be thousands of pounds! My issue here is every individual fed on Christmas Day was homeless the day before, homeless while they were eating their lunch, and still homeless on Boxing Day. What changed? Nothing, except a load of free advert space.
- Newspaper Articles: tapping into 'feel good' stories to make their readers smile and enjoy buying the newspaper, regardless that some of these stories just exacerbate the real issue of the general public not understanding the real issue and solutions, and therefore contribute to making the issue worse.

Definition of Prostitution: the unworthy or corrupt use of one's talents for personal or financial gain.

Definition of Pimping: to make something look fashionable.

Let's say all the above businesses have the best intentions and are truly looking for a way to help the homeless in Manchester, and do not care about profit or free publicity. This then leads us to the question, 'Does any of it help to reduce homelessness?' The clear answer to me and many professionals in this field in Manchester is No.

It is not just businesses that are using the homeless for their own gains, we also have 'professional protesters' that turn up, take over an empty building in the city centre and turn it into so called 'sanctuary' for the needy. Many of these individuals are not homeless themselves, but need a cause to belong to so they feel active, worthy or important. Never are the needs of the vulnerable individuals they purport to champion ever addressed, it is just a lot of noise and slapping each other on the back for 'sticking it to the Man'.

A few years ago we had tent cities popping up all over the city centre. I remember them being in St Ann's Square and the council having to go to court to shift them, they then popped up in another location in the city centre and the whole process started again.

Their whole mantra was 'we stand in solidarity with the homeless'. What they didn't understand was the millions the council spent on legal fees to constantly move them. This was money taken directly out of council tax, our money, which could have been spent on so much more, including better homelessness services which are definitely needed.

For people who know me, I am no council mouth piece, I offer constructive criticism to the council constantly, they need to do better and we should demand they do better. But by forcing a council that has had half of its Government funding cut, to waste money on dealing with protest that calls for better homeless services is preposterous. These 'campaigners' have made us all poorer, including the homeless individuals they profess to stand up for. The biggest slap in the face is the fact that most of the protesters are not even Mancunians!

Definition of Prostitution: to use yourself or your abilities or beliefs in a way that does not deserve respect.

Definition of Pimping: to exploit for your own gain.

The most difficult conversations I have are with individuals or small groups of friends (usually through Facebook) who have taken it upon themselves to be the protectors and saviours of the homeless of Manchester. A noble cause, if they could only understand the bigger picture and actually contribute to real change and outcomes that get people off the streets. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these groups make not the slightest difference; in fact, I would go further and say that at some level their actions are detrimental to the health and well-being of many of the vulnerable individuals on the streets.

Wow, that is one hell of a statement to make; surely I am misinformed or have an alternative agenda. Allow me to explain further.

The issue on our streets is not primarily an accommodation issue, but rather a mental health issue, compounded by drug misuse. Appropriate supported accommodation is part of the solution and we definitely need more of it, but accommodation is not by any means the real issue. Yet, most people think it is. Why? Because they are looking for simple solutions to a complex problem they don't understand. Most people have no concept of the complexities of the lives of people living on the streets.

“The first time we saw Chris he sat in a doorway in the city centre, we introduced ourselves to him and sat down to chat. During this conversation he told us his job was to make people who gave him food and money feel better. We asked him who makes him feel better. He told us he doesn't deserve to feel better.”

Let's take a traditional example, a small group of friends organise themselves through Facebook and go onto the streets several times a week to hand out food they have prepared during the day. Let's forget about food hygiene rules and procedures, we wouldn't want to eat in a venue that didn't practise them, so why is it OK for vulnerable homeless individuals to accept less?

I digress, so they set up their 'soup kitchen' or walk around handing out food and engage 100 individuals. Where is the issue?

First of all, the majority engaged will not be sleeping on the streets, they will be individuals who visit the city centre daily to socialise, beg or take drugs, but have somewhere to sleep. The free food is very welcome and helps this group of people to stay in the city centre longer to beg or take drugs. We now have a great little 'street scene' going on in Manchester city centre, which is attracting more vulnerable individuals into the city centre daily to socialise and be exposed to drug dealers and other unsavoury characters. Given enough time some of these individuals may find themselves sleeping on the streets directly because they were attracted to the city centre in the first place.

Some of the engagement and free food will find its way to genuine rough sleepers. This must be a good thing? Unfortunately, no it isn't. This act of kindness has unintended consequences, such as:

- it stops people accessing the existing support centres for a meal, which means they then do not engage support workers who can help them off the streets
- it allows people to spend longer begging for money for drugs because they have their food delivered directly
- it means every penny from begging can now be spent on drugs because everything the individual needs is handed to them free of charge

This is called unintended consequences, we see it all the time in life when someone does something with the best of intentions but it delivers an unforeseen outcome. Some examples:

- Iraq & Libya Military Interventions: let's get rid of a dictator – a good thing? Unintended consequence: a large part of the Middle East collapses in civil war and millions die, plus the birth of ISIS. I think you would agree living under a dictatorship is better than being dead.
- Spreading Christianity to South America: bringing the word of God to the natives – a good thing? Missionaries also brought many diseases, such as smallpox, flu etc, which killed millions of native people because they had no resistance to the new European diseases.

As humans, we continue to make these mistakes because we are always looking for simple quick solutions to complicated issues we don't understand.

“We engaged a man begging in a doorway in a sleeping bag. We offered to get him into a hostel that evening because it was going to be -3 degrees. He refused and commented that this was a good begging spot and didn't want to lose it. He then added that a businessman wakes him up every morning with a coffee and bacon sandwich. He asked us did we get breakfast in bed every morning? We replied no. He smiled and said that's why he was not moving!”

I have had so many conversations about unintended consequences with so many groups and fail every time at trying to encourage them to think differently and concentrate on outcomes, not activity. I have stopped engaging in debate on Facebook because the conversation always deteriorate into silliness, for example, the most common accusation is I want the homeless to starve to death on the street. Why would anyone starve on the streets in Manchester, there are support centres in and

around the city centre that provide free hot meals daily. These centres also have support workers who can help people make changes and get off the streets. Without getting people into the support centres nothing will change.

The more I speak to these groups, the more I try to understand their thinking and logic. They seem to have a symbiotic relationship, one is the 'giver' and the other is the 'receiver', it is clear at some level they both need each other.

These groups do not make financial gain out of the homeless but they do benefit personally by developing a sense of purpose, superiority and piety verging on a messiah complex. This explains the complete faith in what they do, regardless of any other evidence, and the ease of some to resort to pack mentality when challenged, which can also be called dogma or a cult.

I am not asking people to stop helping the homeless, or even stop going out on the streets to help. In fact, I would encourage people to get on the streets and be part of the solution, but not to look for easy solutions and inadvertently enable people to continue to live on the streets in squalor. Being part of the solution means you actually need to contribute to the solution. Educate yourself with information on support available; make sure everyone you speak to knows where to go to get help. Human contact and positive conversation is really important, we are social creatures, and this contact can help vulnerable individuals to realise they deserve a better life and a better life does exist.

Finally, what was the point of writing this article? Was it just to criticise others and fulfil my own needs for attention, praise or raise donations for my project. Let's hope not, I am not blind to the irony of this article in relation to myself!

It was to challenge the idea that just activity in itself is a solution. We can have all the activity we want on the streets of Manchester, but if it does not lead to vulnerable individuals accessing help, support and appropriate accommodation, then it is all a waste of time, energy and money.

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