

Rough Sleeping, Begging and Spice – Why Manchester?

Why has Manchester got this problem? This is the question my friends keep asking me because I run an outreach homeless project (Change4Good), but no one else seems to be discussing it or even asking the question. How can we attempt to solve a problem if we don't understand why we have the problem in the first place.

The problem started in 2011 when the first round of council cuts came. At this time I was employed by Manchester Council as the city centre Community Safety Manager and was responsible for reducing crime and antisocial behaviour, as well as reducing begging and street drinking, I also Chaired a support panel tackling rough sleeping. I was based in the old Bootle St Police Station.

The first piece of this puzzle was the decision to stop funding the council Street Warden project that proactively moved on people begging, which reduced the amount of drugs they were taking. This team also ensured people didn't drop litter and handed out fines, this role was soon reinstated using a private firm. I was part of the discussions around what to cut and what would be the consequence. It was agreed that a small increase in begging and related antisocial behaviour would be acceptable. This was the correct decision to make at this particular point in time, savings had to be made. Unfortunately, a 'head in the sand' mentality was created in the council where no one wanted to re-look at the problem even though everyone could see it was increasing.

As the same time, the Police made the same decision, begging was not a priority any more even though it was the 2nd highest reported type of antisocial behaviour in the city centre.

Over time, people begging realised they could sit in the same place forever and no one would ever move them on. Begging heaven! Begging began to increase as the word got out that Manchester had easy pickings and no one would hassle you any more. Don't forget that the majority of people begging are not rough sleeping and have accommodation, they are raising funds for a drug habit.

The seeds had been sown.

At this point, I must emphasis I do not blame the Council and Police for the decisions they made in 2011 when deep financial cuts had to be made, due to central Government cutting local budgets. Choices had to be made, money needed to be saved, there were no easy options, every decision made would be painful for someone.

But where I do place blame is the lack of acknowledgement, from the end of 2012, that the problem of begging was getting worse and would continue to do so. Everyone put their heads in the sand and did not want to admit the truth. I had many former colleagues from the council and police express their views to me at this time and stated that none of the 'Top Bosses' were interested in the issue on the streets. In approx 2013 the Chief Constable at the time, Peter Fahy, informed me that any problem on the streets in the city centre were a council problem, or maybe a business problem, but not a police problem. This is not the case now!

The next stage of the issue was an increase in rough sleeping. With a tougher benefit system and heavier sanctions, some people found themselves unable to cope with the extra responsibility put upon them; signing on, being on time, job searches. Mental health services were cut and small support charities could not access funding any more to support vulnerable people. Another reason was obvious, the more people begged, the more money they got, which meant the more drugs they could buy. This cycle of begging and drug misuse opened the door to many people into rough sleeping and then slammed it shut behind them. Trapped on the streets.

It was at this point when the general public started to notice the issue and it became a talking point:

'What can we do?' the people shouted! Unfortunately, what the people did was the wrong thing for the right reasons.

Suddenly on the streets in Manchester city centre, we had armies of kind heart citizens giving out soup, meal deals, blankets, sleeping bags and tents. Surely this will solve the problem?

Unfortunately this kindness had the opposite effect and the issue continued to get worse. We call this unintended consequences, instead of helping people off the streets, they inadvertently enabled people to live on the streets in squalor and make it easier to turn down help and support. Wow, this cannot be true surely? We have many examples of this being the case, please see other articles I have written.

When I had responsibility for the city centre, we never allowed independent groups to set up soup kitchens anywhere they wanted, we would have challenged groups giving out tents and explained to them the facts, and offered them other ways to get involved and help. No one from Manchester Council did this, they just kept their head down and hoped it would go away. At this point, I must emphasize I am not criticising individual officers or teams, but rather the strategic management level and the executive elected members for not having the guts to do what needed to be done but instead went for short term political aims. This isn't rocket science, officers on the ground know exactly what to do to combat such a problem, but they have not had the support they need from upon high. But to be fair to the Council, they did come up with the idea of a 'homeless charter'. If you are a business or individual you can now sign up to the charter and express that you think homelessness is wrong. Really? Yes, this is not a joke. This is the best idea they could come up with: a poor PR gimmick.

Now we have a national reputation of 'the place to be' if you want to rough sleep or beg, we have vulnerable homeless individuals arriving from different parts of the UK and telling us they came here because of what they have seen on social media etc. We have spoken to people from Newcastle, Portsmouth, Bristol etc. Manchester now has a flourishing 'street life' scene, the general public keep them supplied with money for drugs, kind heart citizens feed them and supply tents, and the police and council leave them alone. And you ask why we have a problem?

At this stage allow me to recap:

- In 2011 all deterrents to reduce begging were removed
- Begging increased because no one was moved on any more
- Individuals earned more money from begging and spent it on drugs and alcohol
- Some individuals deteriorated and slipped into rough sleeping
- reduction in support services allowed more people to slip through the safety net
- the general public tried to help but made things worse
- 2017 - police and council are now trying to fix the problem but are 4 yrs too late to have a quick impact

Fame at last, we are now highlighted on the national Press for having our very own Zombies; Spice induced zombies. What is Spice? Basically it is a synthetic super strength cannabis drug, with lots of extra substances thrown in for free.

Lets be clear, if Spice hadn't been invented we would still have an open drug problem today but just with another drug like heroin or crack. Why? Because we have given over the streets of our city centre to beggars, drug dealers and other unsavoury characters.

Piccadilly Gardens has had a problem with drug dealing for as long as I can remember. How can the busiest open public space in the nation's second city have such a problem? I raised the same

question 5 yrs ago on a channel 5 documentary. The answer is simple, ineffective policing. I am not blaming the police officers in the city centre, we had the same problem when I was responsible for the city centre. I spent 2 yrs trying to implement a long term strategy for the Gardens, which included a prevention arm so we could stop the next generation of problems before they happened. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in convincing the powers above me, and lets not forget we had plenty of money, officers and resources at this time.

Our Spice problem is just a visible manifestation of the poor choices the city has made over the last 6 years, nothing more, nothing less. Tackling just the Spice dealers will not solve the problem, arresting the Spice takers will not solve the problem, creating PR gimmicks will not solve the problem and handing out sandwiches and coffee will not solve the problem.

What we need to do is go back to basics; tackling low level antisocial behaviour, disrupting the begging trade, educating the public and ensuring vulnerable individuals are constantly offered help and support. Simple.