

Safer Solihull Community Safety Partnership

Begging strategy

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1.1 Foreward:

- 1.1.1 The presence of people feeling the need to beg in Solihull is a growing concern. Over the last year we have seen reported incidents increasing significantly. Appreciating that there are many complexities to this agenda we cannot be seen to tolerate behaviours that may cause alarm and distress to some people who visit, live and work in our Borough.
- 1.1.2 I am well aware of the concerns about an increasing number of people "taking advantage" of the public's good nature by presenting as homeless and in some cases trying to intimidate shoppers into handing over money. This strategy sets out our partnership approach to support vulnerable people who are in need, but also demonstrates how we will tackle nuisance and criminal behaviours within our town centres and shopping areas across the borough.
- 1.1.3 We know that focusing solely on addressing on-street begging activity will not address the underlying issues associated with begging. Therefore, it is important that if we are to achieve sustainable change within our town centres and shopping areas that we must address both the act and causes of begging.
- 1.1.4 Solihull Council and the wider partnership continue to support people into housing and accommodation and, where those have a need, provide support for drug, alcohol and wider health and wellbeing issues.
- 1.1.5 The Council continues to invest significantly in local support services, such as Solihull Integrated Addiction Services, to help homeless individuals with complex needs. This includes dedicated funding for a housing support service for vulnerable adults, tailored outreach services for those sleeping rough and a specialist housing advice service to prevent homelessness/repeat homelessness amongst those at risk of rough sleeping.
- 1.1.6 In addition, Solihull is part of the West Midlands Housing First pilot, which will enable us to test a new approach to ending homelessness for those with multiple and complex needs.
- 1.1.7 Despite our existing response to homelessness we recognise that there is more to be done. That is why the Safer Solihull Partnership has developed this strategy to support individuals that beg on our streets into tailored support services.
- 1.1.8 In addition, we are aware that our local businesses are tired of the reputational damage that persistent street begging can have on Solihull's retail and entertainment offer. That is why this strategy also sets out how we will look to improve the management of the public realm in our town centres and shopping areas to further reduce nuisance behaviours associated with those that beg i.e. , keeping areas free of rubbish, detritus and drug paraphernalia.

1.1.9 No single agency in Solihull has all of the tools to stop begging and its associated behaviours; that is why we have published this multi-agency strategy. Solihull has a successful record of local partners working closely together. We know that by doing so, we will have the biggest positive impact on those with the most complex needs.

2.1 What Do We Mean By Begging?

2.1.1 Begging in a public place is a criminal offence under the Vagrancy Act 1824. The maximum sentence for begging is a fine imposed by the courts at level three on the standard scale, with a maximum fine of £1000. However the courts can impose sanctions that contain positive requirements e.g., drug rehabilitation to address the underlying motivations that cause people to beg.

2.1.2 With specific reference to the offence of 'begging', the relevant section of the Vagrancy Act 1824 is: 'every person wandering abroad, or placing him or herself in any public place, street, highway, court, or passage, to beg or gather alms'. Whilst the legislation covers individuals that could be considered as putting themselves in 'a position to beg' (for example the common scenario of sitting on the floor with an item like a hat/bowl that members of the public could put money in), it must be borne in mind that this legislation is early nineteenth century and it would not be considered proportionate and necessary to arrest an individual for this offence without other aggravating factors and without a complainant/substantiated evidence.

2.1.3 It is important to note that begging can be associated with other behaviours such as rough sleeping, street drinking, substance misuse and Anti-social Behaviour. This strategy focusses on begging but acknowledges these broader issues alongside existing partnership strategies.

2.2 What Causes People to Beg?

2.2.1 We know through intelligence, from our specialist support services, that the act of begging is a symptom of a complex set of issues based both at the individual and societal level.

2.2.2 Individuals that beg in Solihull may have: substance misuse issues, previous criminal convictions, mental or physical health issues or lack of purposeful activity. They may also be being actively exploited, acting fraudulently and could be sleeping rough. We know that money gained from begging in Solihull can be used as disposable income for a number of different activities, including financing a drug or alcohol addiction.

2.2.3 We also know that wider societal factors can also play a part in facilitating this offending behaviour. Some examples include: the rising cost of living against a backdrop of welfare reforms and austerity which has impacted on the level of financial support that public sector and non-Government services can offer those leading the most complex lifestyles.

2.3 Levels of Begging in Solihull?

- 2.3.1 In Solihull, people's perceptions of begging as a problem in our town centres and shopping areas have increased. The Council's Place Survey for 2018 identified that 25% of the people surveyed felt that incidents of crime needed improving across Solihull.
- 2.3.2 Other results noted are that 30% felt unsafe after dark. 31% reported felt that rubbish lying around was a problem. 19% drug dealing and usage and 8% Anti-Social Behaviour related to harassment and intimidation was prevalent. All elements associated with begging behaviours.

2.4 Perceptions of Begging As a Problem

- 2.4.1 We have seen increases in the number of calls made to the Council and other partners such as the Solihull Business Improvement District (BID) regarding begging in the borough. We note that begging is not isolated to Solihull Town Centre but also occurring at other locations across the Borough where there are high footfalls of people in and around shops and retail premises.

2.5 General Picture of street activity in the Borough of Solihull.

- 2.5.1 Shirley: Average of 3 street beggars in Shirley since 2017.
Castle Bromwich : Average 2 street beggars
Hobs Moat : Average 1 rough sleeper
Dovehouse Parade: Average 2 street beggars
Birmingham International: Average 1 street beggar.
Marston Green: Average 1 street beggar.
Solihull BID (Business Improvement District) has been reporting those in a position to beg since January 2017.
- 2.5.2 1st January 2017 to 31st December 2017 - 20 reports
1st January 2018 to 31st December 2018 - 60 reports
1st Janaury 2019 to 10th April 2019 (current) 292 reports
- 2.5.3 These reports do not include reports from local businesses complaining about street begging or homelessness affecting their business.
- 2.5.4 A large number of recent reports relating to individuals begging have been linked to the use or possession of drugs.

2.6 Who Are the Offenders?

- 2.6.1 The Solihull Integrated Addiction Services outreach service is currently monitoring around eleven individuals who are known to beg.

2.7 Where Do Begging Offences Take Place?

- 2.7.1 The levels of recorded begging are proportionately higher in Solihull town centre. The highest volume locations for begging are in areas either predominantly commercial or are major thoroughfares for residents and visitors to the borough. It is believed that by begging in these locations individuals can maximise the money they receive from the public.
- 2.7.2 It has also been noted recently that begging is not exclusive to the town centre. There have been recent reports of those that beg in the town centre being seen begging in other borough neighbourhoods.

2.8 What Are Local Organisations Doing to Help Those Genuinely In Need?

- 2.8.1 The homelessness and housing advice services provided in Solihull ensure prevention, relief and support is provided to anyone who is homeless or faced with homelessness in the Borough. Solihull Community Housing provides the housing options and homelessness service, discharging the Council's statutory duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. St. Basil's are also commissioned to provide specialist advice, prevention and relief services to young singles aged 16 -24 through the Solihull Youth Hub.
- 2.8.2 In addition the Council commissions Solihull Integrated Addiction Services (SIAS) to deliver a housing advice and assistance service to adults aged 25+ who are rough sleeping, homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. This service is structured around delivery of the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy commitments, with action prioritised around:
- Prevention – integrated working with partner agencies to identify those at risk of sleeping rough before crisis and proactive provision of housing advice, assistance and support with wider health, emotional and well-being needs to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping
 - Intervention – a responsive outreach service to support those who are sleeping rough to move off the streets and towards recovery and to identify new rough sleepers as quickly as possible, supporting them into accommodation and support services before they become entrenched
 - Recovery – support for individuals to find and sustain stable accommodation and to meet wider support needs
- 2.8.3 This approach aims to address the causes and consequences of homelessness; both preventing rough sleeping and ensuring that those who are sleeping rough are supported off the streets. The service also positively manages the transition of these individuals into accommodation and ensures support needs are addressed to maximise the potential for tenancy sustainment.
- 2.8.4 Solihull is also part of the West Midlands Housing First pilot and through this dedicated funding stream will be implementing a new approach to ending homelessness for those with multiple and complex needs. Housing First

focuses on quickly moving people who are rough sleeping/ at risk of rough sleeping into permanent housing. Once in accommodation additional support is provided and support workers co-ordinate all necessary partner services to respond to each individual presenting needs in order to sustain the tenancy and prevent homelessness re-occurring.

2.8.5 Up to 27 individuals will be supported during 2019/20 and 2020/21 with the tenancy support continuing as needed up to March 2023. The only requirement for involvement in the pilot is that individuals agree to take part. The learning from the pilots will influence future policy in this area and gives Solihull the opportunity to learn from a new model of commissioning housing related support which separates accommodation provision from the offer of support and encourages a flexible person-centred approach to delivery.

3.1 Developing the Strategy

3.1.1 The initiatives in this strategy have been developed with a broad range of partners. Organisations that have contributed to the development of this strategy include:

- Solihull Council
- Solihull's Business Improvement District
- Solihull Integrated Addiction Services
- Solihull Police
- Solihull Churches against Homelessness
- Solihull Community Housing
- Business and retail community

This strategy complements Solihull Council's Homelessness Prevention Strategy, Rough Sleeping protocol, Solihull's Severe Weather Plan, Solihull's Health and Wellbeing Strategy and follows closely the wider programme of activity concerning those behaviours associated with begging.

These documents can be found following the attached Links – when publicly available:

Homelessness strategy:

<https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-uds-cse&cx=001270148294147426243:x-utqplidho&q=http://www.solihull.gov.uk/Portals/0/StrategiesPlansPolicies/Housing/Homelessness/HomelessnessStrategy.pdf&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiN9-PB-JfiAhWCyoUKHbS8CY8QFjABegQIDxAB&usg=AOvVaw1YrcKbzcFOsnbWmy8n7VYO>

Rough Sleeping:

<http://www.solihull.gov.uk/Resident/housing/roughsleeping>

Severe Weather Plan:

<http://www.solihull.gov.uk/emergencyplan>

Health and Wellbeing Board:

<https://socialsolihull.org.uk/healthandwellbeing/>

4.1 Delivering the Strategy

4.1.1 Vision

4.1.2 “To improve the quality of the borough environment and experiences for residents, visitors and businesses through the effective management of begging”.

4.2 Core Values

The vision will be underpinned by four core values:

- a. **A shared narrative** – Advice and information for our communities on how they can help and support those in need through appropriate agencies and support services.
- b. **Shelter** – Everyone is offered support to find suitable accommodation;
- c. **Support** – A flexible, bespoke and outcome focussed housing advice and outreach service is provided to support individuals to address wider support needs. Partnerships will be in place to ensure that rough sleepers have rapid access to alcohol, drugs and health and wellbeing services to meet needs and to encourage a lifestyle change
- d. **Enforce** – Prevent begging and change behaviours. Where individuals do not engage and if it is legal, proportionate and necessary to do so we will utilise civil and criminal justice options to reduce offending and promote positive intervention to reduce associated behaviour.

4.3 Key Actions

a. Shared Narrative.

4.3.1 Provide information to the public on ways in which they can help and support those that are homeless and have support needs to enable them to turn their lives around and get off the streets.

b. Shelter

4.3.2 Everyone with a local connection to Solihull will be offered support to find and access suitable accommodation to meet their needs and those without will be offered support and reconnection to their area of origin;

4.3.3 The Council will deliver its Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) to ensure additional support is in place and accommodation options are available during the winter months (and in other periods of severe weather e.g. heat waves) ;

4.3.4 The Council will continue to invest in services that prevent and relieve all homelessness and provide appropriate assessment advice, specialist support and access to accommodation to prevent rough sleeping and ;

4.3.5 The Council will continue to deliver a housing strategy that aims to increase the availability of suitable and affordable accommodation.

c. Support

4.3.6 The Council will support Solihull Community Housing, St. Basil's and Solihull Integrated Addiction Services to develop clear customer pathways to support those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, ensuring that joint arrangements for information, advice, assistance and referral between partner agencies are simple and effective and that targeted support is provided where it is most needed

4.3.7 Solihull Police will look to share information with partners, including the Council, as to those drugs tested on arrest.

4.3.8 The Probation services Community Rehabilitation Company will continue to provide a tailored package of support for low-to-medium risk offenders subject to statutory supervision to include referral to housing and welfare service, 1-1 tailored intervention and supporting pathways in partner services;

4.3.9 Raise further money for our local charities through a refreshed 'alternative giving' communications campaign, to include easier methods for members of the public to donate;

4.3.10 Closer partnerships will be encouraged between locally commissioned services and housing providers to ensure residents have access to the right support and treatment;

d. Enforce

4.3.11 Criminal enforcement by the Police will be considered where a criminal offence has been committed and there is evidence to substantiate it and a complainant, and where it is proportionate and necessary. The Police will not arrest individuals that are simply 'in a position to beg'.

4.3.12 Where there are reports in relation to individuals that do not meet the threshold for an individual criminal offence, consideration will be had for civil enforcement - decision to be taken within the Partnership's 'Harm Reduction & Vulnerable Victims' Forum based upon the circumstances of each case.

4.3.13 Solihull Police and/or the Anti-Social Behaviour service will nominate a subject matter expert who will have responsibility for engagement with partners and the gathering assessing and sharing of information.

4.3.14 Solihull Police and/or the Anti-Social Behaviour service will investigate and develop intelligence received from its partners agencies and communities to assess what appropriate and proportionate action can be taken.

- 4.3.15 Solihull Police will support the established pathway to address at risk individuals who commit offences in our town centres and shopping areas through the Harm Reduction and Vulnerable Victim Forum. The 'Harm Reduction and vulnerable victim forum will assess thresholds. In making decisions as to whether to escalate to either civil or criminal enforcement, partners have a duty to balance the requirements of the Human Rights Act with the impact on other members of the public and local communities – in particular Article 8, 'The Right to a Private Life'. Any action taken must be lawful, proportionate and necessary.
- 4.3.16 The Council will consult on the introduction of a new Public Space Protection Order to improve the management of public spaces in the borough. A public spaces protection order is an order that identifies the public place and prohibits specified things being done in the restricted area and/or requires specified things to be done by persons carrying on specified activities in that area.
- 4.3.17 Work with local housing providers to reduce the number of residents engaging in begging, through the development and implementation of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts; and
- 4.3.18 Continue to share information with partners any relevant intelligence on individuals that beg with more agencies in both the city and across the county.

5.1 Governance and Accountability

- 5.1.1 The Safer Solihull Partnership will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Solihull Begging Strategy and will take regular reports on its progress, consider any risks and agree appropriate responses.

6.1 Measuring Success

- 6.1.1 We will assess the progress of the Strategy against a set of performance indicators, supplemented with detailed analysis from frontline engagement teams. The Safer Solihull Partnership will actively monitor and review the following indicators on begging activity:

- Review annually residents' perceptions of begging across Solihull
- Monitor the number of reported incidences of begging made to Solihull Police, Solihull BID, Solihull Community Housing Anti-Social Behaviour Team, Solihull Integrated Addiction Services and the Council through the partnerships intelligence officers.
- Monitor data on successfully engagement with identified individuals
- Measure the funds raised through the alternative giving process and collection points. Along with the reporting of how those funds have been allocated.
- Monitor data on civil and criminal enforcement in relation to identified individuals