

Introduction

Begging is a type of behaviour that is unacceptable in Darlington. With the colder weather now upon us, and Christmas approaching, the number of people taking to the streets and begging is rising. It is a lucrative activity with individuals gaining £40-£50 daily, and in some cases three times that figure. The majority of this money sustains the drugs trade. Moreover, the presence of individuals begging on the street increases the levels of fear of intimidation among the general public, particularly among those who are vulnerable (eg., elderly, disabled, and children). Those begging usually present themselves as homeless, surrounding themselves with blankets, plastic bags, etc., and other indicators, to suggest that they are living on the streets. We know that this is not the case, but is rather a fraudulent exploitation of public sympathy. The sites that beggars occupy, alongside cashpoints and car park pay stations, cause some people to avoid the town centre altogether. This has an impact upon the High Street, damaging retail and community cohesion.

Begging is not restricted to Darlington, it is a national issue. Attempting to respond to it has proved highly contentious. What is clear, however, is that it is an issue which no single agency can solve. Only by working together can the many organisations that have an interest in the problem, stop this form of antisocial behaviour. Hence the development of a strategy embracing all partners.

A Strategic Approach.

The strategic approach to begging in Darlington has four strands, comprising empathy, engagement, education, and enforcement.

Empathy

People beg for a variety of reasons. In order to change the behaviour, we need to understand what is motivating it. Our experience in Darlington, though it may be different in other places, is that homelessness is rarely a driver. Begging to feed an addiction is commonplace, whether to drugs, alcohol, and gambling. Some beg to meet everyday needs such as paying rent or paying an outstanding bill. And sadly, some are motivated simply by greed

Whatever it is that motivates an individual to beg, this strategy begins with the presupposition that the individual begging matters, and helping them to modify their behaviour contributes both to their well-being and to the well-being of the community. It also begins with an understanding that as a community we have the resources to meet any need that a person begging presents, and will not withhold them.

Actions

1. All partners to positively promote understanding of the precursors of begging to avoid any interventions being conceived as victimisation. The myth that beggars are casualties or victims of an uncaring community must be debunked.

Engagement

From empathy we move to engagement. For about 18 months now, the 700 Club has delivered an initiative to those begging in Darlington with a view to helping them overcome the need to beg. The initiative is funded in part by the PCVC and in part by Darlington Community Safety Partnership. A dedicated worker engages in support at street level, seeing and speaking to the individuals that beg approximately 3 times a week, and offering, on the spot, opportunities that include emergency accommodation (we have emergency accommodation that is available 24/7 with en-suite rooms, washing facilities and breakfast), access to the 700 Club and other Floating Support services, handholding to access the local authority homelessness pathway or to access substance misuse services, help with setting up benefits and maximising income, help with budgeting, help around mental and physical health. And a whole range of other types of intervention aimed at moving the individual away from the need to beg.

Actions

1. Street level engagement funding to be maintained (CSP)
2. Street level engagement to be systematic rather than ad hoc, with each individual having a support plan in which all engagement and goals are documented. (700 Club, Police, Housing Option Team)
3. All agencies are equipped with information to give to those begging about what is available to them. Information would include how to access accommodation, food, or agencies to support them. This to be delivered in an appropriate form, i.e. leaflet, card.
4. Coordinate with the Streetlink initiative, and with Street Angels
5. Regular multi-agency meetings to be convened to share intelligence and to ensure that appropriate services are in place (lead agency, Police).

Education

Begging continues because it is lucrative. Much of the good work achieved through engagement is easily undermined by the spontaneous generosity of members of public. Taken in by the presentation as homeless, money is uncritically placed into the begging bowl. Sadly, we know that such kindness can kill. Education of the public, therefore, must go hand in hand with the one-to-one engagement with beggars. This to include using posters, flyers, magazine and newspaper articles, and the "Have a Heart Give Smart" initiative. The objective is to stop people giving to individuals on the street, but rather to support the agencies that are trying to help them.

Interrupting the cash flow, making life harder for individuals who beg, will of itself motivate some to engage with agencies that can help them overcome the issues that lead them to beg. We acknowledge, however, that some individuals will simply seek an alternative revenue stream, and that acquisitive crime figures may be impacted. Police partners regard this as an acceptable risk.

Actions

1. Local authority to produce posters, flyers, etc., and use media opportunities to engage the public in helping those who are begging in a constructive way.
2. Publicise all the work that is being done collectively to improve the situation of those who beg. Affirm that whether by support or enforcement, the best interest of the individual is primary.
3. Engage retailers, both in the daytime and nighttime economies.
4. Promote the "Have a Heart, Give Smart" campaign so that the public are made to feel part of the solution, rather than contributing to the problem. Being generous is a good thing, and it is important not to alienate the public by criticising acts of compassion.
5. 700 Club to create a giving portal, stating that money is given through it will be used directly in the support of those begging, and ring-fenced
6. Police and Local Authority to provide "talking heads" to underline the fact that this strategy is motivated predominantly by concern for the individuals begging.

Enforcement

Because, some members of the public will always act on emotion rather than knowledge, begging will continue. To respond to this, consultation is currently in progress around the use of Public Space Protection Orders. The intention would be to remove those begging from public places where the public that sustain them are located. These orders to be imposed and enforced by Local Authority and Police working jointly.

The courts too have a part to play in this strategy. Efforts have been made to inform and educate magistrates so that they share in the determination to help those begging confront their issues as well as form legal judgements. Self-evidently, to simply present a beggar with a fine, leads to more begging.

A further enforcement tool is the best use of the powers contained within the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 covering community protection warnings (CPW) and notices (CPN) and criminal behavior orders (CBO) in attempt to support both negative and positive behaviours.

Other powers such as reporting for public order, Obstruction of the Highway and the Vagrancy Act can also be considered, however should the offences be aggravated then arrest could be considered.

All police activity will be recorded as part of Operation Speedball; whose objective is to tackle anti-social behavior within the town centre which incorporates begging.

Actions

1. Judiciary to be educated in regard to this strategy, and to be kept informed through Chair of Magistrates - police liaison
2. All partners to contribute to the evidence base for enforcement, so that at the point of Orders being made, it is clear that significant effort has been made to encourage behavioural change outside of the judicial system.
3. Enforcement to be the response of last resort
4. Improved intelligence sharing amongst partners to identify key offenders, locations and times
5. All response teams to be rebriefed in relation to support Operation Speedball

As a caveat to all of the above, though rare Darlington, begging is sometimes used to fund organised crime under the auspices of gang-masters. This strategy is shaped by an understanding that those begging have needs, and by meeting those needs, however complex, their begging will stop. It does not apply to the category of begging motivated by crime or to deliberately defraud. This is a straightforward policing matter and will be dealt with accordingly.

