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Catholic charities attack London council's plans to 'criminalise homeless' with fines for rough sleeping

03 June 2015 17:37 by Liz Dodd

Catholic charities have vigorously condemned a London council for threatening to fine homeless people up to £1,000 for sleeping rough.

Mick Clarke, chief executive at homelessness charity The Passage, said that Hackney Council's new Public Space Protection Order (PSPO), which gives police the power to fine people for anti-social behaviour including begging and sleeping rough, was "short-sighted and ridiculous".

"When you get into a position where you're actually criminalising rough speaking you've lost the argument," he said. "Nobody's born on the street, no one wants to be on the street. Surely you should be looking at solutions to get people off the street."

He described the policy as "using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. If this is the where the Government will be going, it will be ridiculous and it will fail."

Cathy Corcoran, chief executive of the Cardinal Hume Centre, warned that fining rough sleepers would be counter-productive.

"This move to fine people for rough sleeping is neither pragmatic nor compassionate; criminalising people who are already vulnerable is counter-productive and highly likely to make their situation worse. Instead, we should be putting our energies into supporting people out of homelessness rather than punishing them with a fine they can't afford to pay."

But Keith Fernett, chief executive of Caritas Anchor House, described Hackney Council's initiative as "interesting."

"We are in the midst of a housing crisis in London and services for homeless people are having acute problems, particularly in relation to those with complex needs including mental health and drug and alcohol misuse. I hope Hackney Council and their partners show consideration for those with desperate needs and nowhere to live, who require additional support to move on from homelessness," he said.

Hackney's Deputy Mayor, Sophie Linden, said that enforcement of the PSPO would be a last resort.

A petition launched against the initiative has amassed 32,000 signatures in five days. A similar public protection order proposed by Oxford City Council was dropped after a petition against it was signed by 72,000 people.

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