

Sheffield Council's PSPO will be a hard blow for the homeless

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Sheffield Council's PSPO will be a hard blow for the homeless

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In April 2025, Sheffield City Council introduced a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) aimed at addressing anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the city centre. The PSPO contains prohibitions on 'Drinking alcohol in an anti-social manner', 'Begging', 'Loitering', 'Drug use', 'Public urination/defecation', and imposes requirements to 'Provide your details' and 'Leave the restricted area'. Punishment for breach is a fixed-penalty notice of £100, though the Government is currently seeking to increase this to £500.

PSPOs were established under 2014 legislation; in the time since, they have been subject to scarce scrutiny, largely due to the absence of central government oversight. Over the past decade, the Manifesto Club has played a crucial role in shedding light on the scale of PSPOs by identifying how many exist, what behaviours they target, and how they are enforced.

At the Institute of Law & Justice at Sheffield Hallam University, we have conducted empirical research around the implementation and impact of PSPOs. A focus of our work has been how PSPOs are applied against people experiencing street homelessness, raising several concerns about the scope and implications of Sheffield's PSPO.

PSPOs are blunt tools that, according to Home Office guidance, should be used proportionately. Having a PSPO cover the entirety of Sheffield's city centre is disproportionate and unlikely to be enforced consistently enough to be effective. The city centre houses key service providers for people experiencing street homelessness,

such as Shelter Community Hub, Roundabout Homeless Prevention Service, Cathedral Archer Project, as well as the Magistrates and Crown Court. These services can support individuals in moving away from behaviours associated with ASB, yet the risk of enforcement under the PSPO may discourage them from entering the city centre.

Moreover, the prohibitions and requirements appear designed to disproportionately target vulnerable groups, notably people experiencing street homelessness. This contradicts Local Government Association PSPO guidance and Sheffield City Council's 'Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy 2021-25'. Any significant ASB can be dealt with through existing police powers, suggesting that duplicated enforcement tools are unnecessary. If the purpose of the PSPO is simply to demonstrate that the Council is 'cracking down' on ASB, its use is difficult to justify.

Research from Sheffield Hallam University has shown that PSPO prohibitions on begging, street drinking, and drug use did not deter, prevent, or stop people experiencing street homelessness from engaging in these behaviours. Instead, enforcement generates a cycle of displacement for vulnerable citizens; worries have already been raised that the PSPO will simply displace problems to neighbouring residential districts, rather than reducing them. While Sheffield City Council's production of a 'Harm Reduction Enforcement Pathway' and 'Notices of Intended Action' is a welcome development, there remains a need for further clarity about how these measures will be used and evaluated now that the PSPO is active.

There is also the possibility that people experiencing street homelessness will be subject to two-tier enforcement. The clause prohibiting 'Drinking alcohol' only applies when it is done 'in an anti-social manner', introducing levels of subjectivity that can lead to unequal application. Research has shown that similar PSPO provisions are often enforced against people experiencing street homelessness but not those participating in the night-time economy. Similarly, the prohibition on 'Public urination/defecation' fails to consider the lack of public toilets in Sheffield city centre, especially for people excluded from private facilities in shops or restaurants.

The concerns outlined here are grounded in empirical research on PSPOs, and warrant discussion. At every available opportunity, my colleagues and I have raised our apprehension with Sheffield City Council and offered to support them in pursuing

more proportionate, inclusive alternatives. It is disappointing that the council has implemented the PSPO in its current form, but I remain hopeful they will be open to revising its implementation in light of evidence-based recommendations.-----

Dr Benjamin Archer is a Senior Lecturer in Law in the Institute of Law & Justice at Sheffield Hallam University. His PhD examined how local authorities, police forces, and elected officials implement Public Spaces Protection Orders.