**Faith & VCS Homeless and Vulnerable Forum – Position Statement on Gloucester City Councils Street Aware Campaign – Posters….. January 2018**

**Background**. Gloucester City Council is seen as an important member of the Forum. It has been and is instrumental in supporting and feeding into the Forum as part of its remit as agreed with the County Council when the Forum was set up. Over the last 18 months to 2 years we feel that real improvements have been made where the Forum has encouraged partnership joint working, better communications and coordination, signposting, building bridges and trust, etc., The Forum has at times raised issues where there could be seen to be service improvements, gaps in provision.

**Position**. In response, we would first like to say that we are therefore saddened that the City Council didn’t see fit to work with us on their new campaign or engage with the Forum or the community it represents.

We see that this has only helped to cause controversy, locally and nationally and has said to have been divisive. It has politicised views which we feel has been unhelpful, and the Council has ended up being critised when it has been working hard to try and help raise awareness.

Why has it been controversial? One poster, there are three, is said to give a negative message because of its poor choice of words. It identifies and links the homeless with those who are professional beggars, scroungers, those who have accommodation and already receive support i.e. the message being that many rough sleepers are not genuine. Hence said to unfairly demonise and stigmatise the homeless, the message reinforces a negative stereotype about the homeless.

We are therefore disappointed that the campaign has, perhaps unwittingly, focused on the negative reasons why someone might be on the street.

**Reasons why people beg**. There are many reasons why people have to beg on the street. There are a small percentage who are said to beg aggressively, professional beggars, many have been dealt with and resolved through existing powers of the Council such as the yellow/ red card scheme and by the police and ended up in the Magistrate’s Court. Yes, some people who beg will have addiction issues and may also have accommodation, so it must be questioned whether giving money directly to such individuals is the best way to support them, as the Council say, to ‘help make a positive and sustainable change’. **However**, there are many other reasons why people need to beg. Others find themselves for real in a terrible situation, may need money for rent or service charges at their accommodation. May have been evicted from County Council Accommodation Based Services for the homeless (ABS) and left for 6 weeks on the street, (the County wish to stress that this is not now a blanket rule) or felt at risk at the City Councils Emergency B&B accommodation, where there is a lack of support, supervision, monitoring. May be because of the lack of adequate accommodation especially for vulnerable women, poor standards, safeguarding risks, lack of dignity vulnerable people experience,… all as flagged up by Healthwatch. May have been hit by a benefits sanction and have no money for heating, lighting or food, left destitute. May have lost their job, been evicted. May be very vulnerable, have mental health or learning disabilities….. Try talking to the person begging, find out why, take them for a coffee…….There is real worry that the introduction of Universal Credit will cause extreme hardship for many people in vulnerable situations, hence our letter to the Rt Hon Esther McVey MP, Secretary of State for Work & Pensions.

Note: We have taken expert advice regarding the City Councils proposed PSPO Order, initially with respect to begging.

We all seem to be missing the bigger picture here in that there is an alarming lack of suitable, (for housing vulnerable people), and appropriate, emergency/ short term accommodation for the homeless, particularly for women; appropriate accommodation for those with mental health problems; those with drug or alcohol problems; and related poor standards, safeguarding risks and lack of dignity. You can have the best operating Streetlink and best resourced Outreach Team in the Country, you can have START, but if we don’t have suitable and safe accommodation to back them up, with appropriate support, a foundation to work from, it’s ultimately at risk of failing individuals and perpetuating the revolving door syndrome.

**Accommodation**. Councils have a duty to ensure that suitable housing is available. We have raised concerns about unsuitable emergency/short term B&B accommodation utilised at present by the City Council, accommodation needs to help meet the Councils and our aim, ‘to make positive and sustainable change’. It has been suggested that we talk to the Landlady at one such B&B who has flagged up real concerns about the number of deaths in 2018 and lack of appropriate referrals systems in place resulting in said to be inappropriate placement of an individual adjacent to a school. (Info on the Forums web site, under Latest News…link <http://e-voice.org.uk/fvcshomelessforum/>).

Realistically, you have a small window to work with this vulnerable group, to help get them support, to make ‘positive and sustainable change’ as the Council rightly say. But again, putting them in unsuitable B&B as short term emergency accommodation with others in the same dilemma, is a cause for concern. We have raised the failure of private landlords to issue Rent Receipts. How can you build vital relationships with vulnerable individuals in a B&B? When individuals are moved on to more permanent housing with private landlords, again there are problems with unsuitable accommodation, uncaring landlords, as recognised by the Council. We would welcome and support the City Council in looking to improve the situation; they have said to the Forum…

*’Gloucester City Council…. is reviewing all our housing agreements, services and homelessness accommodation and will be meeting with all our landlords to discuss our processes and what is expected of them. We will also be writing to all the B&B landlords explaining our guarantee scheme and we will be advising them as part of the scheme rent receipts should be provided to all residents when they pay their contribution. This letter is currently in draft form, once it has been signed off and sent to all landlords I will send you a copy for your reference’.* We await with keen interest as to how this positive move progresses.

We agree with Heathwatch, ‘That a minimum standard of housing for vulnerable people be agreed, with an adequate level of emergency housing available’. Sadly, we saw a lack of evidence of a positive move by the local authorities or agencies to address this and other recommendations. We do fear that Heathwatch may have been effectively silenced following the recent re tendering process undertaken by the County Council; where there were nine permanent staff at Healthwatch, there is now one with one Manager.

Previous accommodation-based housing support used to have a staged provision, low to high. At present there is a time framed 6 month model for ‘move on’, however, you cannot push everyone into a 6 month time frame and would look to flexibility in this. We would support moves to a more ‘person centred’, holistic approach such as Aspire SiB, for the 18-24’s, and ActionGlos a new and welcomed SiB for the homeless because existing services are unable to work with entrenched rough sleepers and repeat users of present homeless services, in a long-term, innovative way, to help stop the revolving door syndrome.

**Alternative Giving**. Where was the information for the public on the homeless charities they could give to? Richard Graham MP helpfully referred to GlosPAT a local charity being set up to fund help.

We would encourage the City Council to look at what must be the high cost of B&B, there must be a better way….and to work with everyone to find ways to address the issues highlighted by Healthwatch. And yes, replace the poster with a positive message that doesn’t demonise and stigmatise a vulnerable and marginalised group of our society. And yes, we urgently need to see adequate and suitable accommodation to back up the hard work undertaken by our Homeless Services such as HHT, P3, Greensquare, CGL, ARA, Emerging Futures, Time to Heal, homeless charities and local volunteer groups etc…..they all deserve better. We all need to be aware that the City and County Councils are going through very challenging times, due to tough austerity budget cuts, so it’s essential we work together and encourage continuing dialogue.

In summary, we will always believe that everyone deserves the right to a place they can call home, but more than that, that everyone deserves the right to feel safe, to feel valued and to feel positive about their future.