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Criminalisation of Homelessness:

The Bill introduces a framework on ‘nuisance begging’ and ‘nuisance rough sleeping’. This includes granting an ‘authorised person’ the power to direct an individual to move on from a location and not return for 72 hours. It also creates prevention notices and orders, which, if not complied with, can result in a fine of £2,500, a month in prison, or both.

These clauses would replace those within the Vagrancy Act 1824. I am aware of calls to enact the repeal of this Act, which was agreed to in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. This agreement had cross-party support and was a momentous victory for campaigners, as it effectively decriminalised rough sleeping and begging.

I strongly object to the provisions on nuisance rough sleeping. We must remember that rough sleeping is a symptom of other policy failures – such as housing, poverty, and mental healthcare provision. According to Shelter, there are over 300,000 people currently experiencing homelessness in England. Aggressive rough sleepers need support, and I do not feel that criminalising those in need will help to resolve this issue. By not addressing the root causes of homelessness, this Bill does not go far enough to address the challenges that we face.

The issue of nuisance begging is more nuanced. Some organised criminal gangs can use begging for their own ends, and these strategies can be aggressive and antisocial. This is wrong, and I therefore support powers that can tackle organised begging. These powers do, however, require greater humanity to protect those who are being exploited and are genuinely destitute. My colleagues laid several amendments on the issue of nuisance begging at Committee Stage which, disappointingly, did not pass.

I want to see cross-party work done to improve this legislation. I supported the Bill at Second Reading, as it includes welcome measures on issues such as fraud, antisocial behaviour and image-based abuse. More widely, I want to see the creation of a workable housing-led strategy to tackle homelessness. We need to provide people with access to support before they arrive onto the streets and ensure everyone has a meaningful route out of rough sleeping.

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