

Westminster: soup runs for homeless to stay



Soup runs for the homeless will not be banned from a part of central London after a council U-turn, MPs were told today.

Commons leader Sir George Young said Westminster City Council was now taking an "enlightened approach" and would allow soup runs for the capital's rough sleepers.

There had been protests against the local authority's plans, which it said were justified because the handouts from the area around Westminster Cathedral kept the homeless on the streets for longer than necessary.

The council also sought to introduce a by-law to ban rough sleeping around cathedral.

Today, Sir George said the Tory-run authority was now seeking a "non-legislative approach" but soup kitchens were more desirable when operating from "established" buildings rather than on-the-street.

He told shadow Commons leader Hilary Benn: "The portfolio holder at Westminster City Council (Cllr Daniel Astaire) has made it clear he wants a non-legislative solution. He plans to have discussions with those running the soup runs.

"It is already the case that two soup run providers have agreed to provide their services within a more settled environment and I welcome that.

"You might also look at some of the comments made by those helping rough sleepers about the desirability of trying to focus the soup runs within an established building rather than having a magnet which attracts rough sleepers from all over the capital.

"I very much hope we are at one on rough sleepers and that we can support Westminster City Council and the enlightened approach which they are now taking."

The council's consultation on rough sleepers will continue until March 25.

Earlier this week about 500 people, including church groups and representatives of the Big Issue,

attended a protest outside the cathedral.

Mr Astaire, in charge of adult services at the council, said: "We want to reach a solution that will help the homeless into accommodation where they can access the support they need.

"We have run a successful consultation which has received almost 200 responses so far, and some interesting ideas have been put forward as an alternative to the proposed by-law.

"But we've also had strong views expressed by the local community about the current situation.

"We will consider everything that has been said and propose to meet with interested parties to try and reach a solution, which has the support of all reasonable people.

"Ultimately, we all share the same aspirations and that is to help those who have ended up on the streets off them and into better lives."

Ross Macmillan