

Youth bear brunt of British budget cuts

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7 September 2010

Young people's services are being closed down across Britain as spending cuts dictated by the Conservative Party/Liberal Democrat coalition and their Labour predecessors take effect.

The June emergency budget, which reduced spending by £6.25 billion, means local councils are making reductions for the current financial year, and are already planning further enormous cuts that will take effect in the next four years.

For example, Sheffield City Council has cut £6.5 million this year, and £219 million more over the next four years. Around half of this year's cuts target services catering for children and young people. These follow the scrapping of a £55 billion project to rejuvenate over 700 decrepit schools and the cancellation of the £235 million Playbuilder Scheme to build up to 1,300 playgrounds.

Councils are slashing back the Connexions careers advice service between 10 percent and 50 percent, in what Steve Higginbotham from the Institute of Career Guidance describes as "devastation" of the service. Katharine Horler, chair of Connexions, warns that "teachers will come back from the summer holidays expected to fill the gap with less resources and no time to prepare for it". It coincides with news that 186,000 students have been denied access to a course of study at university this year, leaving thousands of young people without suitable career advice.

Last month "Activity Agreement", a scheme to assist young people not in education or work was closed down. Not only the jobs of those in its five West Yorkshire offices are involved, but it jeopardises the futures of a vulnerable layer of society. This is the tip of the iceberg as, for example, Leeds City Council has

announced £4.8 million of cuts from children's services this year, alongside £1.9 million from charities, many of which deal with young people.

In North Yorkshire, health visitors have been told to act as school nurses due to acute staff shortages, as there is one nurse for every five schools in the region. On top of this, the number of health visitors has fallen from 200 in 2005 to 133 today.

In Scotland, Aberdeen City Council has predicted cuts of £45 million to education, sport and culture budgets over the next five years, pending details of the government's comprehensive spending review to be published this October. As in the rest of Britain, the authorities are holding consultation "workshops" with staff to plan massive cutbacks while supposedly "preserving" public services.

The coalition's *Programme for Government* states that Sure Start centres, which provide early education and health advice, will close down in all but the neediest areas. A scheme of "incentivisation" and "pay by results" is being prepared to reduce the service's funding.

In July, the government launched the National Citizen Service, a residential scheme that will see all 16 to 18-year-olds volunteer for outdoor pursuits each summer. Some 10,000 youths will be involved in pilots this summer, with funding from charities, business, and possibly from young people themselves. The scheme is a gimmick, because there is already some provision for volunteer work for young people, amongst other youth services that are threatened with massive budget cuts. Doug Nicholls, Unite's national officer for community, youth workers and not-for-profit sector said, "The £13m due to be spent on the pilots is equivalent to the

cuts in the youth service in five authorities I am dealing with at the moment. Overall, those five are cutting £200m this year from social services young people really need”.

An existing, similar, volunteering scheme begun by the previous Labour government in March has been cancelled, saving the government £7 million of the £14 million budgeted for the project.

As part of the Tory “Big Society” agenda, many local council children’s departments will be put onto the market. To give this wholesale privatisation a democratic facade, the government is encouraging workers to form co-operatives and bid for contracts alongside companies. Twelve trials of the so-called “Mutuals” are taking place, four of which are children’s services, with an eye to expanding the idea across the public sector. They include an organisation to help homeless people established by NHS workers from Leicester and a co-operative in Swindon incorporating adult social services and community health.

Indicative of the prospects for those looking to begin a venture in the new “Big Society” is the fate of Marsh Farm Outreach, a community organisation to create small businesses set up by long-term unemployed workers from an estate in Luton. Earlier this month the project was denied funding on the grounds that it had not been attempted in a developed country before. Glenn Jenkins from Marsh Farm Outreach observed that “before the election Nick Clegg came to Marsh Farm to meet the Outreach team and commended the years of hard work we have done to bring [the idea] to the UK. Nick went on the record saying that it was the exactly the kind of project the government should be encouraging and supporting nationally”.

The so-called “Big Society” is nothing more than a continuation and deepening of the right-wing, free market policies employed by all governments over the last two decades. It is a pseudonym for privatisation, massive spending cuts, attacks on jobs and conditions and the destruction of the last vestiges of welfare programmes.

The “Big Society” flourished this week as Serco, an outsourcing company that grew to prominence in the 1980s buying up sections of the Ministry of Defence, announced increased profits of 22 percent for the last six months. It has made enormous gains buying up public services, and expects to cash in further as privatisation accelerates.

The coalition government hopes to make public services jobs voluntary in order to drive down wages, relying on charities instead of government and local authorities to provide social services.

Many young people’s charities are already in a funding crisis. Home-Start, a charity that supports families with young children in East Hampshire, narrowly avoided closure this April by scraping together small grants and from fundraisers. Its chair of trustees David Bailey has noted that despite high levels of social need and praise from the government for their service, they are “making economies and they want the voluntary sector to pick it up”.

North City Play, a Liverpool charity providing activities for disabled children during school holidays, faces an uncertain future. Its co-ordinator Eamonn Leavy says they are “no stranger to cuts in local government spending”. They have been given illusions of security as Prime Minister David Cameron announced the “Big Society” in Liverpool, promising extra government support to the city. However, the largest budget cuts since the Second World War are likely to hit charities hard, as they rely on the government for a third of their funding.



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