

UK: Peterborough care home workers resist closures

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Staff and local residents have protested calls by Conservative-led Peterborough City Council for the closure of the English city's last two council-run care homes for the elderly.

Greenwood House and Welland House provide permanent homes for 32 residents, respite care for 80 people each year and regular day care for 69 people. The two homes employ 184 staff.

On the day the Olympic torch passed through the city, staff from the two homes protested with banners. They collected 300 signatures that day on a petition opposing the closures. There has been widespread local support for their campaign, with around 3,000 signatures on the petition when they presented it to the council.

The staff also plan a presence at council meetings. Many members of the public voiced support for their demonstration.

Because of the protest, Terry Rich (Director of Adult Social Care) has instigated a 90-day consultation period on the closures. Staff, residents, and residents' families will have one-to-one meetings with specialist social workers, who will explain what will happen if the homes close. The public have been invited to submit written suggestions to the council. The charity Age UK has been invited to act as advocate for dementia sufferers.

Comments from these sources will be included in a report currently being prepared by council staff. This report will be submitted to the council cabinet for them to make the final decision. All of this is a fairly transparent ruse. Terry Rich has insisted that, despite the 3,000 signatures, the consultation is "not a referendum", indicating the council's determination to press ahead with the closures. One Labour councillor, John Knowles, has accused Tory councillors of "brazenly" crowing about the closure consultation.

Peterborough City Council defends the closures on the grounds that the homes are not fit for purpose and the bedrooms are too small. But the council recently spent over £100,000 refurbishing these homes. The issue of bedroom size has not been raised during the past decades of use of the homes.

Care workers are of the opinion that the size of the bedrooms is not as important as the quality of care the homes provide.

Peterborough City Council estimates the homes closures can save them £146,000 each month. The council argue that they are reviewing care accommodation to ensure that it is "high quality and [meets] modern-day standards". The council's all too predictable argument is that this can be ensured by private sector elderly care provision.

The council has already been forcing elderly people into private care homes. On local radio Terry Rich insisted, "In the independent sector there are plenty of good quality beds available."

When it was pointed out that neither Greenwood nor Welland House has been accepting new permanent residents for a while, Rich claimed, "It's not needed to really, because people are choosing to go into the care spaces that are available".

Journalist Paul Stainton responded, "Well they're having to, if you're not accepting them, aren't they? ... So you're forcing them into private care".

Some of the elderly residents at risk in Greenwood and Welland Houses were placed in these care homes in 2010 after the closure of two other council homes, Peverils and Coneygree Lodge. Now, 14 months down the line, they are being asked to move again. Care workers have said that at the time of the earlier closures the council gave a guarantee that residents would not be moved again. They have also expressed doubts about

the care available in private care homes. They report incidents of other elderly people being moved into private care homes, only to be brought back three weeks later.

These residents are among the most vulnerable members of society. Many care workers have expressed concern that the stresses of another move would reduce the life expectancy of people in a very frail condition.

It is already clear that these plans are distressing residents. Clara Woods, 93, has been resident in Greenwood House for nine years. In interviews with the *Peterborough Evening Telegraph* and local BBC Radio, she has explained that the proposal to close the facility has left her in tears. "This is my home," she told the press. "I'm determined I'm not moving. Why are they doing this to us? I'm very happy here."

With the utmost cynicism, Rich used Woods' emotional comments as an opportunity to attack care staff. At a scrutiny meeting for health he said that "the assistance and willingness of staff, even if their jobs are threatened, to reduce anxiety is crucial. That does not mean setting off old ladies into tears on the radio."

His comment was met with disbelief by staff and families of residents, who stormed out in anger.

Rich has said he is not considering standing down in response to angry demands for him to do so. He also refused Paul Stainton's invitation to apologise publicly to staff for his comments, saying, "What I've done is I've said that I'm more than happy to apologise to the staff if the impression has been given that I think that that was their general view."

Stainton noted that what was at issue were Rich's actual words, and "not an impression".

Rich has received the full backing of Conservative councillors, who are confident in his previous experience of closing other care homes. Councillor Wayne Fitzgerald, cabinet member for adult social care, told the *Evening Telegraph* that the council's care home provision cannot continue as it is.

These proposals are part of Peterborough City Council's annual £2 million budget cut from Adult Social Care, part of the national £82 billion public spending reduction proposed by Westminster to supply quantitative easing for the banking sector.

The council has a record of privatizing as many services as possible, so that all revenue streams go to

private corporations and investors. The majority of the council's housing stock was transferred to the Cross Keys Homes housing association in 2003-2004. As of 2012 the council has no affordable housing stock.

Refuse collection, building maintenance and other services formerly provided by councils, have been privatised and are run by the Enterprise Group (owned by the private equity company 3i). Sports, leisure services and libraries are run by the Vivacity group, a not-for-profit company with charitable status.

Despite all the evidence of the council's intentions, the Unite trade union's regional officer Mick Doherty has called only for an intensification of efforts to get councillors to change their minds. He has suggested more leaflets and petitions.

Unison's regional officer John Toomey, while attending a meeting on the issue of closures, had little to say in public about mobilizing workers in defence of care homes. He has largely confined his remarks to noting that workers have behaved in a dignified manner. He made some vague suggestions that Terry Rich should "consider" his position.

Rich, in fact, is deeply conscious of his position. He has spoken openly of seeking the support of the unions in preventing any broader opposition to a programme of cuts and closures. He told local radio "I think the trade unions have an important role to play, because it is very difficult. There are a large number of staff, both union members and not union members, that will need the support of the trade union over this difficult time... I'm more than happy to meet with [Toomey] to talk about things."



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