

UK trade unions seek to block wider campaign against care home closures

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At a recent service users' support group meeting attended by 45 staff and families threatened by the closure of Peterborough's last two council-run care homes for the elderly, no local councilors attended.

The Conservative-run council has announced the impending closure of Greenwood House and Welland House. Between them they provide permanent homes for 32 residents, respite care for 80 people each year and regular day care for 69. They employ 184 staff.

Over 4,000 people have signed a petition against the closures. The meeting reflected this anger. Jacqueline Hagan told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters she was "absolutely disgusted" by the proposals. Her mother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease and attends Welland House at weekends. "If she can't go to Welland House at the weekends I know she will have a shorter life," she said.

John, whose father is settled and happy in Greenwood House, said, "These people [the council] have no idea what they are doing to the elderly people like my father, and they just don't care."

Yvonne Hossack, a solicitor who has conducted many campaigns against closures relating to elderly care, spelled out the impact of such closures in her report to the meeting. The only thing that protects the elderly and vulnerable from death or serious decline is for all residents and staff to be moved together. Otherwise, she said, "it doesn't matter how sensitive the treatment, how kind, how good the facilities, what it costs or how many experts are consulted."

Kevin Boyer from the Alzheimer's Society said, "If patients with dementia are going to survive a move they need to know the staff who are caring for them; it is crucial that the staff go with the residents."

Hossack discussed the first closure campaign she had worked on, 15 years ago. Even then, with affected patients at a much lower level of frailty and need, 37

percent of those moved had died within months of the event. Studying this against mortality rates in care homes across the same area over a four-year period she had found that closure effectively doubled the death rate.

When she had first started these cases, it was said of every ten people that were moved, three would die, three would be stable, and the other four would suffer various degrees of mental and physical decline. The situation today is much more serious because people are taken into care accommodation when they are in a much frailer state. Even the announcement of a consultation with residents on closure can prove fatal.

Peterborough Council is in the process of cutting £2 million from its Adult Social Care provision budget and has a long track record of privatization of public services. "In the closure of care homes," Hossack said, "we are executing innocent people."

Hossack noted all the mainstream political parties close care homes and bear the responsibility for the results. None of them likes to hear this, and Hossack has faced prosecution for allegedly bringing her profession into disrepute, proceedings instigated by a coalition of Labour/Liberal/Conservative councils. Legal aid for campaigns against care home closures has been stopped.

Councils increasingly use public consultation as a means of protecting themselves against judicial review. Consultation reports are used in council cabinet reports to judicial bodies, she explained, and after that in defence against legal proceedings. Consultations "are used not to save but to ratify" closures. She saw nothing wrong with petitions, but said she had never known a petition on its own to save a care home from closure.

One speaker at the support group meeting revealed that the charity Age UK has been appointed to act as advocates for dementia sufferers during the current consultations. A representative of the Pensioners Association told the meeting that Age UK has supported

the council in such changes and reforms, having recently restructured as a business so that it can bid for contracts on care homes.

Age UK have told campaigners they have opposed the closure, but said that if it does go ahead they want to ensure it will not upset service users too much. There were suggestions made in the meeting that Age UK could not be impartial, as Conservative councilor John Holdich is on their local board of trustees.

Peterborough Council fully intends to use the public consultation on Greenwood and Welland Houses as a public relations exercise, just as Hossack described, while proceeding with the closures. Terry Rich, director of Adult Social Care, has openly stated that the consultation is “not a referendum.” People in the meeting complained that when they had tried to ring the council no one would even speak to them.

The meeting had been organized to urge a campaign limited to pressuring the council to change its mind. It was explained that the final decision on the consultations is expected October 16. When someone commented that similar consultations have always resulted in closures, Chairwoman Donna Bennett, representing the union Unite, pointed to arguments between councilors on this issue. Suggesting this meant the campaign was “having some effect,” she insisted, “We will give a good fight and hopefully it will go our way.”

A speaker from the Pensioners Association said, “You need the involvement of the trade unions.” In reply Bennett claimed the unions “are still involved”, but cautioned that some Tory councilors have suggested the campaign against the closures was being conducted “on the political front.”

Unison Regional Officer John Toomey said that, rather than disputing the role of various charities, protesters should concentrate on writing letters to the council people who make the decisions. He suggested that unless people are completely onside they should not be part of the campaign.

Stephen Woodbridge, who stood for the Socialist Equality Party in last May’s local elections in Peterborough, then spoke from the floor. He stated, “What is happening here is happening across the country. The coalition government’s Health and Social Care Bill is aimed at destroying free and comprehensive health and social care.

“In South West England, 19 NHS Trusts have formed a special pay cartel to break nationally agreed pay and conditions for NHS staff with the threat that anyone

resisting the plans will be sacked. In each instance, the government and the Trusts have been able to rely on measures first introduced by Labour. Billions have been made available to the banks and the super-rich, yet vital provision on which millions of working people and their families rely is being dismantled, supposedly because there is not enough money.”

Woodbridge added, “I would like to issue a warning to residents’ families and carers. The consultation procedure initiated by the council and entered into by the trade unions present is a fraud. There have been countless consultations. They have always led to shutting down and privatizing...We urge you to withdraw from this consultation procedure and denounce it for what it is—an attempt by the council and trade unions to suffocate widespread opposition to the attacks on the elderly and austerity measures as a whole.”

When there were 400 job losses at Peterborough council, the council and Unison had set up a joint consultative forum to ease through compulsory redundancies, he explained. Two years ago Unison branch secretary Rhona Henry had expressed confidence in “working together” in a “more open partnership style of working” with the Tory council. Woodbridge concluded, “No trust can be placed in the trade unions or the Labour Party to defend any social provision.”

He called for the formation of neighborhood committees of action, in every workplace and community, to defend these homes and other vital social provisions. He insisted that the government must be brought down and replaced by a workers’ government that starts from the essential needs of society, not the profit motives of big business and the banks.



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