

UK: Peterborough city council's social cuts target elderly, disabled

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29 December 2012

Peterborough City Council in England is again targeting the elderly and disabled in its determination to implement budget cuts and austerity measures in line with government policies.

As part of the assault on adult social care provision, the Conservative Party controlled council is considering scrapping the meals on wheels service to save an estimated £100,000 per year. The service provides one hot or frozen meal daily to the frail and vulnerable. The service is provided by a private company, Apetito, with council subsidies.

Cutting this service, or raising the price of a meal by cutting council subsidies, would leave a large number of the city's elderly people, who rely daily on this service, at risk of malnutrition. A large proportion of the elderly people who use the meals on wheels service do so because they cannot cook or go shopping alone.

Anticipating a public outcry over the proposal, the council has established another of its misnamed "consultation periods". Previous consultations have been used to allow local people to vent anger, and to avoid a judicial review, without affecting the decision which has already been made. It is not known how long this consultation will last.

The council is reported to be considering a number of proposals. One is to remove the subsidy for the meals on wheels service. This would mean the price of a hot meal would rise from £3.20 to £5.20, while frozen meals would rise from £2 to £2.60. This would be a huge increase for a pensioner to fund out of often meagre weekly budgets.

The consultation is also considering proposals for changes in adult social care provision to reduce costs. These include changes to the rules for disabled people who access social care services. At the moment the disabled can have part of their income disregarded

when calculating the amount they must pay towards their care. The proposal is to introduce a banded payment system, which would mean disabled people paying more for services that are often a necessary part of being able to live and be cared for in their own homes.

Another proposal is that disabled people be charged for the use of assistive technology, including assistive, adaptive and rehabilitative devices.

Councillor Wayne Fitzgerald, cabinet member for Adult Social Care, who played a key role in the recent closure of Peterborough's last two remaining council care homes for the elderly, said, "We are approaching the third year of a four-year cycle which will see the council's budget reduced by 28 percent. We have no choice but to continue to provide key services such as adult social care for a rising population, with less and less money. We don't want anyone to have to pay more for the care they receive, but we have to rethink the way we provide services to ensure that the money we have available to provide care is spent on those with the greatest need."

This means greater means-testing in order to cut the budget for Adult Social Care. It will inevitably involve further privatising service provision and a general cut in the services available. The end result will be to place a heavy financial burden on the most vulnerable members of society.

In order to oppose these measures, lessons must be learned from the previous campaign against the closure of the city's last remaining council-run care homes.

A committee was formed at the time to fight against the closures. Made up mainly of mainly family members of relatives in the facilities, plus some staff, the chairwoman was a Unite trade union shop steward.

Unison, the UK's largest public sector trade union,

also played an important role in the background in advising the group to set up a petition against the closures, which received approximately 3,000 signatures, which was followed by another petition requesting the council provide finance to build and run two new care homes.

Meanwhile, after the council had staged its “consultation” over the closures, both care homes were shut down and the residents moved into private care facilities.

Not once did the trade unions try to mobilise workers in the city against the closures. They isolated the campaign group, condemning it to failure, while its petitions directed opposition to the closures back towards the very councillors who were proposing the cuts. They confined demonstrations to small affairs, mostly aimed at lobbying councillors.

To defend these hard-won social gains and democratic rights, the working class must organise independently of the trade unions. Only by developing its own organisations of struggle can the working class defend and mobilise against these savage attacks.



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