

Local UK official who said disabled children should be “put down” resigns

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Independent member of Cornwall Council Collin Brewer resigned February 28 in the wake of a report only recently issued by the council’s Standards Committee concerning an incident that occurred in October 2011. Whilst speaking to Disability Cornwall representative Theresa Court at an event in Truro, Brewer stated that “disabled children cost the council too much money and should be put down”.

It took nearly 18 months for the Standards Committee to “resolve” the complaint Court subsequently made and recommend Brewer write a letter of apology.

Initially, Brewer insisted, “I have no intention of resigning. I don’t think I have done anything wrong. I have apologised”. In an interview with the BBC, he claimed he was just “trying to provoke a reaction from charity workers in order to start a debate” and that “We had had a difficult morning deciding on budget and job cuts”.

Court said, “I think he’s digging a deeper hole. He said he was having a bad day, well he should think about another job. I was at the event with parents who have beautiful disabled children. It was a vile and hideous thing to say, truly offensive.

“If was really sorry he would have apologised after two days, not a year and a half”, Court added.

Disability Cornwall chairman Steve Paget said, “It is of great concern to us that anyone with such beliefs, let alone to vocalise them, could be a representative and elected member of our local authority”.

Brewer was forced to hand in his resignation as a result of public anger. A Facebook page, “Cornwall Councillor Collin Brewer should resign”, had attracted 3,692 supporters.

Brewer nevertheless maintained he had received messages of support from at least six local councillors over his remarks. Now, a second councillor, Neil Burden, head of Children’s Services, has released a statement

apologising for saying there were “too many disabled children” and referring to one child as “it” in comments he made about the expense of keeping handicapped children alive in 2010 to the chair of the Parent Carer Council (PCC) in Cornwall, Sandra Ward.

Ward is now demanding Burden’s resignation, saying, “No child should ever be referred to as ‘it’ and as for there being too many of our disabled children I do not know how to respond to that, as a parent or as the chair of the PCC, as I have never heard such an awful statement in the 12 years of my daughter being born”.

A Disability Cornwall added, “The feedback we have received has unfortunately only confirmed our fears that pervasive and negative attitudes towards disabled adults, children and their families do not exist in isolation and are part of a culture that perceives disabled children and adults as a burden on Council budgets.

“Disability Cornwall supports the views of the PCC and recognise it has become increasingly clear that a culture of fear is preventing individuals from speaking up as they believe this could impact on them personally when it comes to accessing services.

“Representative organisations are also fearful of speaking up as so many are currently re-negotiating contracts for council funding and there are Council officers and members who are fearful for their own positions if they raise their heads above the parapet”.

Brewer’s statement is extraordinary revealing. Fresh from the council chamber and a meeting to discuss cuts, he walks out and decides to start a “debate” on whether or not the disabled should be put down to save money. This says something about the tenor of discussion he was involved in that day and throughout his period in office. One can imagine the assertion being made that to balance the books and cut expenditure, one must “think the unthinkable”.

What other vulnerable people are considered potential

targets—the old, the mentally ill, the very poor?

Cornwall Council, a coalition of Conservatives and Independents, has been at the forefront of imposing the cuts demanded by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. In 2010, it pledged to make £170 million savings over four years.

One of Cornwall Council's first actions was to agree with the unions on a pay freeze and cuts to holiday leave and allowances, with all concerned claiming the measures would save jobs and protect front-line services. The council boasted that it was “the first local authority in the country to reach a collective agreement of this scale with its staff on making changes to their terms and conditions of employment”.

Within a year, however, plans were announced for the wholesale outsourcing of council and most local health services to the private sector. Nearly 800 council jobs, as well as more than 150 jobs from the county's three NHS trusts, were to be transferred.

These plans were subsequently watered down in an announcement in January of a “Cornwall strategic partnership” with telecom giant BT, involving the transfer of 340 council staff. Conservative leader Fiona Ferguson claimed keeping some work in-house was actually advantageous as “It's easier to do [cuts] in-house, as it can be done in a controlled way, rather than renegotiating with a partner”.

One service the council has agreed to cut, Cornwall Face 2 Face, provides a free and confidential service, run by the disability charity Scope. The service is provided by trained individuals who have experience with disabled children and offer emotional support to parents of such children. Cornwall Council will end its part of the funding on March 31.

In such an atmosphere, it is little wonder that talk about there being too many disabled children should become common currency and Brewer thought he could get away with saying they should be “put down” without any consequences. Brewer says he may run for re-election in May.



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