

Hampshire council in England closes more care homes

Joan Smith, Ajanta Silva
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Three more care homes in the county of Hampshire, England —Nightingale Lodge in Romsey, Bulmer House in Petersfield and Deeside in Basingstoke—have been targeted for closure by Conservative Party controlled Hampshire County Council (HCC). Four homes have already been closed since 2011.

The council is overwhelmingly Conservative, but councillors from the Liberal Democrats, and right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Labour also voted for the latest closures.

Nightingale Lodge and Bulmer House are to close immediately and Deeside will close in the autumn of 2014, causing immense distress and difficulties to 121 elderly, frail and vulnerable patients and their families and destroying 193 jobs.

Thousands of people have signed petitions in defence of the care homes. There have been angry protests—particularly at bogus public consultation meetings which are ritually held before transferring public entities into the private sector.

HCC has already slashed its budget by £130 million since 2010 and cut its staff by some one-third. It recently announced it wants to make a further £90 million of savings by 2015 and is considering further job cuts, a freeze on recruitment, renegotiation of workers' contracts and a clampdown on the use of agency staff. It wants to reduce demand for services, including social care of the elderly and disabled, which accounts for £277 million of the council's £712 million budget.

HCC has defended its decision to close care homes by claiming that they are no longer fit for purpose and it "would not be economically viable to bring them up to standards." It has cynically commented that the decision was not driven by financial considerations but was part of a shift towards providing more care assisted

homes, a type of sheltered housing with services available on site if required, that will make people more independent.

These are the usual government lies used to justify the attacks on services and the acceleration of the privatisation process. Instead of people becoming more independent, the slashing of services by councils across the country has created a massive crisis in care for elderly, disabled and people, particularly those with dementia in their own homes and in care assisted homes.

What is happening in Hampshire is not unique. The closure of what remains of publicly-run care homes and day centres across the UK has been a major result of the government's slashing of funds for local authorities.

Last October, Leicester City Council confirmed that it plans to close or sell off eight care homes by 2016. In the same month, Labour controlled Durham County Council started its so-called public consultations on shutting down its remaining five care homes, saying that it was facing a £222 million savings target for 2011-2017 and private-sector care was cheaper. Seven homes were closed by the council in 2010 as part of budget cuts.

Leeds City Council, Doncaster Council and many more local, city and county councils, whether they are run by Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats or Greens, have put forward their plans for closing down care homes, day care centres and other services in order to save money.

Thousands of residents who live in those homes have been transferred to private care homes and thousands more are to face this horrific situation. The fate of council workers is no different. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been culled and many more are to follow.

At the same time, the constant slashing of funds by the government has led councils to shorten care visits to those who remain in their homes—often to a bare minimum 15 minutes regardless of an individual’s care needs. Councils are widely using cheap private care providers who use highly exploitative zero hour contracts for their workforce and fail to provide the appropriate training.

The workers at HCC have seen their living standards nose-dive over the last three years. The Unison trade union is trying to prevent any united struggle emerging outside of its control by keeping the dispute local and limiting opposition to the signing of fruitless petitions and pleading with the politicians who are responsible for the attacks, including UKIP councillors. Last month, Tony Hooke, deputy leader of the ten-strong UKIP group on the council, announced that UKIP had formed an “historical allegiance” with Unison, Unite and Labour “to work with the council to protect jobs.”



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