

UK: Green Party presides over homeless crisis in Bristol

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Bristol's affluent middle class have applauded the city being awarded the status of European Green Capital for 2015. But Bristol's working class has little to celebrate after years of grinding austerity.

Over the last three years, £91 million in cuts have been ordered by millionaire mayor, George Ferguson, devastating vital services and eliminating jobs in England's sixth most populous city. The Green Party has been key to their imposition.

Earlier this month, a Bristol City Council report revealed that in the last year, the number of homeless families has trebled and the cost of providing emergency accommodation has doubled to more than £3 million a year. Four years ago, the number of families living in emergency accommodation was zero. Last year, the number was 40, and today it stands at 140. The report blamed the rise in homeless on "the shortage of affordable housing in Bristol, rising rents in the private rental market and welfare reform."

These figures are just the tip of the iceberg. Unaccounted for are large numbers of workers and youth living on the breadline and forced to "sofa-surf" with friends to avoid ending up on the streets. This is vividly depicted in the 2015 documentary, *Where am I sleeping tonight?* by former homeless Bristolian turned filmmaker Martin Read.

The shortage of affordable housing can be traced back to the 1970s with Edward Heath's Conservative government's abandonment of council house building and subsidising the cost of housing for tenants—enriching landlords and banks. In the 1980s, the Thatcher government gave council housing tenants the "Right to Buy", in the largest ever privatisation of public assets, and forced councils to transfer their estates to housing associations. This trend escalated under the New Labour government.

The current Conservative government (and the previous coalition with the Liberal Democrats) is reforming the misnamed "affordable housing" programme, making it easier for developers to opt out of providing a small percentage of lower-rent housing in their schemes. It is extending the "Right to Buy" to housing association tenants, which will be subsidised by forcing councils to sell "high-value" homes, speeding up rent rises, social cleansing and the gentrification of Britain's cities.

The government is withdrawing housing benefits for young people under 21, slashing working tax credits, reducing the cap on the amount of benefits a family can claim, as well as slashing Employment Support Allowance for the sick and disabled by £30 per week, making a rise in homelessness inevitable not just in Bristol but across Britain.

The Green Party has benefitted from widespread opposition to austerity. Earlier this year, the Bristol Green Party announced that its membership had reached 1,000, and in the South West of England region as a whole "well over 5,000" had joined. The press release declared, "The people are joining Bristol Greens in ever increasing numbers because they can now see at last that there really is a political party which believes in social, environmental, and economic justice and which can win in order to deliver such a society."

In May 2014, the first Green Party Member of the European Parliament in the South West was elected. In this May's election, the party's Westminster parliamentary candidate came second after a 26.8 percent increase in the vote and the party more than doubled its number of local councillors to 13 in the 70-seat chamber that was once a bastion of Labour Party rule.

But what has been the Bristol Green Party's record on housing and homelessness? The Green Party's manifesto for 2012 declared, "We do not agree with the logic of cutting public spending at a time of recession," and pledged to "fight for Bristol resources." Even then it was apparent the party would cut a deal, promising to "exercise care to minimise the damage of the cuts on the most vulnerable."

It was enough for the newly-elected Ferguson to offer the Green Party councillor for the Ashley area of the city, Gus Hoyt, the position of Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods, Environment and Council Housing in his six-member "rainbow cabinet." Hoyt accepted, a decision unanimously endorsed by the local Green Party.

Events soon demonstrated that the Green's manifesto promises were worthless.

Hoyt and Green Party councillor for Southville, Tess Green, declared that there was "no alternative but to accept the financial situation which has been imposed upon us." They voted to support £35 million in cuts to jobs and services in the 2013 budget, and raise council tax by nearly two percent. Hoyt and Ferguson together sought to force the council to drop its no-eviction policy for council tenants affected by the bedroom tax.

When it was revealed that the budget proposals included cutting 40 percent of the Homelessness Prevention Fund, Green Party councillors declared, "We were horrified". They decided the fund "had to be saved."

"However, in order to do so, savings from other parts of council spending would need to be made," they stressed, pointing the finger at the Adult Leisure Learning service. These plans were only abandoned after local opposition.

As a result of Ferguson's budget being passed, funding was cut in 2013 to Bristol Foundation Housing (BFH), a charity that ran 10 hostels with 400 desperately needed beds. It was obvious that the result would be catastrophic, given the closure in 2012 (before the creation of the mayoral system) of two hostels run by charity Alabare "following Bristol City Council's decision not to commission such services in the future."

BFH trustee Tricia Davis explained, "Despite an unprecedented need for our services housing vulnerable adults with issues of mental health, addiction, trauma,

domestic violence, illness and learning difficulties, the charity has not received the funding it needs to continue."

BFH ceased to offer supported accommodation in September 2014.

Currently, there are around 15,000 people on the council waiting list for affordable homes in Bristol, the most expensive city for housing after London. When Ferguson came to power in November 2012, he pledged 1,000 new homes a year by 2016. One year later he announced that only "40 or 50" houses would be built in 2013 and gave a revised target of 600 homes by 2017.

In June 2015, Hoyt's successor as assistant mayor with responsibility for housing, Green Party councillor Daniella Radice, revealed the administration was building just 70 new homes per year. After complaining, "You could look at Bristol and see a situation arising where all the working class people are having to move out of the city," she added that the selling off of high value council homes was a "key part" of the council's own "asset management strategy."

Radice claims she is urging Ferguson to lobby the government to allow Bristol the power to abolish "Right to Buy" in the city, but she knows that this will never happen.

Along, with other Green councillors, she abstained in the February 17 vote on another cuts budget. She protested, "This is the horror of austerity. We have to face up to the reality that there will be more cuts..." before stepping forward in her role as assistant mayor to front proposals to close seven libraries.

The closure of six libraries has now been shelved after local opposition, but opening hours and staff numbers will be reduced. Ferguson insists savings will have to come from other services.



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