

# UK: Labour Mayor in Salford rubber stamps closure of disabled children's school

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With the unanimous backing of his majority Labour cabinet, Labour Party Mayor of Salford City Council (SCC), Paul Dennett, has rubber stamped the closure of The Grange, the only residential school for disabled children in the north-west city. The closure means the end of a vitally needed service in a city with a population of 233,000.

Dennett is a vocal supporter of Labour's nominally "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn.

On August 22, as the closure was being pushed through, local residents responded angrily, shouting "traitor" and "shame" at Dennett and his Labour colleagues from the public gallery of Greater Manchester Salford City chambers.

Shutting The Grange is only the latest in the austerity cuts imposed by Labour in Salford, which, as with other Labour-run councils nationally, has devastated basic public services throughout the UK. Since 2010, Salford Council has imposed £186 million in cuts. The closure of The Grange, threatening 13 staff with redundancy, is aimed at saving the council £300,000, as part of a £15.8 million cuts package to be imposed for 2017-18.

The announcement comes after a long battle conducted since 2013 by families of the children affected and the local community against council plans to reduce services provided by the school.

Dennett attempted to justify what is the cruellest of cuts by referring to the "horrific financial challenges" facing councils after the 2008 banking crash and subsequent bailout of the banks, which led to never-ending cuts in funding from central government. Mayor Dennett never mentioned that the bailout was initiated by the then Brown Labour government.

Lisa Stone, SCC's Lead Member for Children's Services, denied there was even a need for the service, saying there was "no demand in the foreseeable future for full-time care" of disabled children.

This is false. There are 25 disabled children in Salford requiring full-time residential care, who live away from their families in private residential homes outside of the borough. The Grange, which has been deliberately under-occupied, has space to accommodate some of these children in its three spare places.

Moreover, the National Children's Bureau recently estimated there has been a 50 percent rise in the number of disabled children in England with complex needs since 2005, including a doubling of children with complex autism.

In July 2013, the council announced that respite care would no longer be provided for 27 children and their families. At the time, the five-bed establishment had a different function, serving as a respite centre, providing holiday breaks for children with such conditions as autism, cerebral palsy and epilepsy. This allowed the families of the children much-needed time to recharge their batteries.

Salford Council proposed three options, including closure, privatization or turning The Grange into a long-term residential school for disabled children with highly complex needs.

Such was the public outcry against the threat to The Grange that the council opted to keep it open, but changed the provision it offered. Consequently, The Grange would provide medium to long-term residential care, including education, for five disabled children—the undisclosed aim being closure at a later date after running the facility down.

The local *Salford Star* cited a council report claiming the respite centre did not represent "value for money," and was under-used, with an occupancy rate of 40 percent, with the council later revising its own figure up to 70 percent.

This was belied by the fact that parents said there was sometimes a waiting list of up to 18 months to access the

care the centre provides.

The 27 children who use the Grange were to be sent either to the Granville adult respite centre, if they were 14 years or over—something strongly objected to by parents—or be placed with enhanced foster carers. Of the latter, there existed only one in Salford, and foster homes are usually not equipped with special bathrooms, nor have wheelchair access, safe play areas or sensory environments.

The Grange was subsequently turned into the medium-to long-term residential school for children with highly complex needs that it is today, rather than a respite centre.

The council never intended to bring any of the 25 children with highly complex needs—that were catered for outside the borough—back to Salford where their families live. To date, there are only two children cared for in The Grange, though it could cater for five. On two occasions, other local authorities have tried to refer children in their areas to The Grange, but staff were told it was not an option as the centre was “due to be closed.”

By closing the present unit and sending the two residents out of the borough, the council, disregarding the impact this will have on their well-being, said it could save £300,000. In a report countering the council’s claims, the families of children at The Grange responded, “To remove the children from their home, school and health professionals will set them back years.”

Corbyn himself has played a cynical role in the closure. On a visit to Salford during this year’s general election campaign, he had the temerity to sign the 3,000-strong petition to save The Grange, even as it was being readied for closure by one of his own supporters.

Dennett was carrying out the directive of Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, who wrote to all Labour councils—shortly after Corbyn was elected leader in 2015—instructing them to pass budgets that satisfy “fiscal credibility rules,” meaning they must balance their budgets and implement cuts.

Over the four years since closure was first threatened, the main public sector trade union, Unison, has barely lifted a finger in opposition to the council’s plans.

The Unison branch has worked to steer the “Save the Grange Campaign” towards futile appeals to the Labour council, including a disingenuous exercise in public “consultation.” A statement issued by the branch on August 15 stated, “In management desire to force through such a closure they have failed to consult or to consider the potential for compulsory redundancy.”

Only the day before Dennett pushed through the closure

did Unison finally announce the result of its “consultative” ballot of staff in Children’s Residential Services—which resulted in 91.3 percent support for industrial action to save the centre.

Despite weeks passing since then, and Salford Unison’s passage of a motion committing it to a ballot for industrial action to oppose the closure, and to merely “consider” balloting “other members within the City Council to support our members in Residential Services,” nothing has been done. And this from a union with more than 4,000 members in Salford, 1.4 million members nationally and an income of around £200 million.

Labour’s attack on vital services, with the collaboration of the trade unions, exposes the role of the main pseudo-left groups—the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

Salford Unison Branch Secretary is SP member Steven North; the union’s treasurer Ameen Hadi, an SWP member.

In response to a recent WSWs article, SP member Paul Gerrard declared that the Socialist Party “needs no lessons from the SEP [Socialist Equality Party] on fighting Labour cuts.” As a supposed example of fighting cuts, he cited “UNISON’s local branch, in which there are precisely NO bureaucrats—where SP, and as it happens, SWP have some influence ...”

What Gerrard omits to mention is that the Socialist Party is *stuffed* with leading union bureaucrats, including those from the Salford Unison branch to which he refers.

Only in April, the newspaper of the SP boasted of “An excellent meeting of over 100 Socialist Party trade union members,” which was “a real show of strength of the presence and impact of the Socialist Party in the unions.” The SP boasted about having “19 members on union executives and candidates standing in current key union elections, including in Unison, PCS and Unite as well as many others who are reps, shop stewards or working in trades councils.”

Steven North himself, as his own Twitter account declares, is Unison’s male member on its National Executive Committee (NEC) for the North West. The female representative on the NEC for the North West is long-standing SWP member Karen Reissmann.



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