

UK workers protest Special Educational Needs and Disabilities cuts by Bradford's Labour council

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Parents and families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) held a large protest outside Labour-controlled Bradford council last week to oppose cuts in staffing for children who receive support in mainstream schools.

The council rejected the concerns of families and unanimously voted through the cuts.

The changes will see the support services for SEND children restructured into one service for all children and young people up to the age of 25. Between 25-30 members of staff will be lost across the borough, with the aim of saving an estimated £770,000 a year. As well as making cuts to services, the council is asking schools to contribute 30 percent of funds from school budgets to run the services.

Similar cuts are being implemented across the country in response to the Conservative government's new "fairer funding" policy, which comes into effect this month. Although under this new formula Bradford should be receiving an additional £15 million to meet current levels of pupil-need, the government is only making half that available (£7.5 million). The council also said that it has had its overall budget cut by 50 percent over the past five years.

The "fairer funding" initiative is a ruse. It is aimed at reshuffling investments to give the appearance of increased funding, but schools will continue to suffer unacceptable levels of reduction in funding and resources. The ever-worsening situation had been opposed by campaign groups and teachers, who demand equal allocation of funding among schools as well as increased funding. In response to criticism, in July the government promised an additional £1.3 billion in a package of "fairer funding."

With the extra money, total budgets are to increase to £2.6 billion for schools in England over the next two years. However, the truth is that no extra spending at all is being allocated by the Department of Education (DoE), as the £1.3 billion is coming from "efficiency savings" from its existing budget.

Some £420 million of the savings will be cut from the DoE's capital budget. Further savings of £250 million will be made in 2018-19 and £350 million in 2019-20 from the department's resource budget. This will be offset as £200 million is being taken away from its central school improvement programme.

According to the Association of School and College Leaders, schools require a further £2 billion a year between now and 2020 if they are to be able to deal with previous budget cuts. Since 2015 alone, schools have suffered a real-terms cut in funding of £2.7 billion.

Many inner-city areas of the UK will lose out in the new funding formula because funding is largely being redistributed from schools in one area to top up another.

Special education provision, which is a statutory requirement, has become a major target. Many councils have already imposed a reduction of transport services to take children to school and back. Many of these children spend at least 2-3 hours a day travelling.

Hackney Council in London announced they would slash funding for children with special needs last year in response to the "fairer funding campaign," which saw large protests and demonstrations by families.

The Labour-run council halved its SEND inclusion team last year, slashing the number of specialist teachers helping support special needs children in

mainstream settings. It proposed further cuts in its 2018/19 budget—including two successive 5 percent cuts in funding for all special needs children. It also proposed changes to how children are assessed for special needs.

The council had to put these measures on hold due to opposition, but its solution will be to make savings from elsewhere.

A 2016 survey of 1,100 school leaders found that 90 percent of primary schools and 80 percent of secondary schools saw funding for SEND provision affected by cuts to the local council.

Conservative-run Surrey County Council is reportedly England's second most financially at-risk council, just after another Tory local authority, Northamptonshire, which recently became the first local authority in nearly 20 years to effectively declare bankruptcy.

In Surrey, parents of children with special needs have crowd-funded a judicial review of council attempts to slash more than £10 million from SEND funding—including cuts to special schools, home-to-school transport, post-16 provision and early years services. Campaigners argue that the council has failed in its duties under equality and human rights legislation.

A Surrey council spokesman said, "The money we get from the government has failed to keep pace with the steep rise in numbers of children needing support for special educational needs—there's now a £15 million gap between what's needed for them and what's given. Funding has risen but demand and cost pressures are outstripping the increase—many councils across the country are facing a similar situation."

Anne Heavey, education policy adviser for the National Education Union, said, "We have never seen a situation when we can look at a child's need and deliver the support they need in a timely and efficient fashion for them to thrive. For too long, children with SEND have been less likely to succeed in exams, to access good quality college or university places, and to access the workplace. They are at high risk of exclusion, high risk of loneliness and mental health problems."

These cuts are being imposed under conditions where there is a large increase in the number of children who need additional support in schools. The government's

own figures show that over 4,000 children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or a Statement have no educational provision and are therefore not in school at all. This figure has increased more than fivefold over the last five years.

- There is widespread recognition of a significant increase in the number of EHCPs. For example, West Sussex reports a 42 percent increase since 2014.

- There has been an increase in the number of children identified with complex special educational needs.

- The age range for which EHCPs must be provided by local authorities has been extended and must now include 0-to-5-year-olds and 19-to-25-year-olds. This has happened at the same time as the government has cut local authority funding.

- The cost of independent provision for children with SEND has been increasing. For example, West Sussex local authority estimates an additional cost of £2.7 million for 2018/19. Other local authorities such as Hackney have highlighted the escalating costs of independent provision.

Tory and Labour representatives in central and local government refuse to fund even the most basic requirements of some of the most vulnerable people in society, while the trade union bureaucracy hasn't lifted a finger to mobilise opposition.



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