

The terrible effects on children of Labour's austerity measures in Bristol

Mark Blackwood

17 May 2018

Bristol is the second richest city per capita in the UK, but also one of the most unequal. It is ranked among the top 10 percent nationally for inequality. The south side of the city is ranked second worst in the country for the number of young people going on to higher education.

When Labour Party-led Bristol City Council embraced Conservative Party policy in 2011 via the creation and later appointment of a directly elected mayor, they claimed the city was going to be one of the first in Britain to usher in a new era of "people power" and solve this social problem.

"People power" it was not. The new mayor was George Robin Paget Ferguson, an architect and businessman who stood on a "Bristol 1st" ticket. Ferguson took over all executive functions. He was given ultimate control of decisions relating to staffing, the tendering of council services, awarding of contracts, housing policy and planning permission.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the Conservatives' Localism Act (2011), which set the framework for the mayoral system and claimed to give local communities greater control over local services, was "a cynical exercise designed to enable corporate and financial concerns to tailor locally administered public expenditure and assets to their interests." Cuts, outsourcing and privatisation would follow.

The cheerleaders for localism were Labour, the unions and the Green Party. They all declared that local control was the only way to save the city from the budgetary restraints being imposed by the Conservative-led central government.

Labour's Marvin Rees was elected mayor in 2016.

Since 2011, there has been a staggering 78 percent cut to the city's annual budget, from £201 million in 2010-2011 to £45 million in 2019-2020. Bristol's

public services have been overwhelmed and now face collapse. The council employs 3,000 fewer staff than it did 10 years ago—a cut of a third from 9,234 in March 2008 to 6,217 today.

With the backing of the trade unions and active participation of Bristol's Labour and Green parties, a "hit list" was drawn up targeting 112 vital services, including meals-on-wheels, school "lollipop" patrols, dementia support, classroom assistants, drug and alcohol services, homelessness, as well as youth and children's services.

The most vulnerable sections of society have suffered. Lives have been lost. At least six people have needlessly died sleeping rough on the streets of Bristol over the last 12 months, because funding for support workers and night shelters has been cut.

Michael Angell was found dead outside a shop in the city centre in March 2017. Paul Larner, known locally as Punk Paul, was found in the Bear-pit pedestrian interchange in October 2017, one of four homeless people to lose their lives in the city in the space of one week. Adam Zajac died in the city centre in February 2018 and an unnamed homeless woman was discovered dead last month.

A recent report published by the council, headed by Rees, has outlined plans for an additional £7.4 million in funding cuts over the next five years.

Children's Services are the target. Last month it was announced child services are to be cut by a further 30 percent. Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, set the tone when they 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.

Rees' Labour administration has announced the cuts

despite the child poverty rate now standing at 28 percent in the city and the demand for experienced family intervention and child protection workers rising to levels not seen since the early 1980s.

Recent figures published by the *Evening Post* revealed that, in the Lawrence Hill area, half of all children are struggling just to eat. Some 50,606 emergency food parcels were handed out between April and September 2017. Of those, some 18,280 were designated for children.

Bristol Children's Services are now reporting mounting caseloads. Social workers are under increasing pressure. Each one is expected to manage 25 usually difficult and heart-breaking cases on average at any given time. The results are predictable—a high turnover of social workers with around a quarter resigning annually. Around half of those employed in front-line services have been in their posts for two years or less.

Despite the exodus, all the Labour mayor has to offer is more cuts and palming the services off to charities and volunteer groups.

The Strengthening Families Programme, issued this year by the council, catalogues how “[c]hildren's social care services are oversubscribed with high caseloads; turnover in front-line teams is higher than required and over reliant on inexperienced social workers.”

In the next breath it declares, “The Statement of Intent for the Programme is to make cost savings,” with the inevitable sugar-coated statement, “[W]hilst holding our ambition of improving outcomes, commissioning and delivering quality services and keeping children and families at the heart of what we do.”

The “Strengthening Families” report admits, “We are taking too many teenagers into care.” It also states that cuts to youth services will create more problems in the future, because such services often act as a barrier to prevent children entering the youth justice system and embarking on a life of crime.

One proposal put forward by Rees to address the increasing cost of growing numbers of children in care is to charge parents £160 per month, or £40 per week, through a “voluntary agreement” under Section 20 of the 1989 Children Act. (Local authorities can also compulsorily remove children with a court care order.)

What Rees' terrible proposal fails to take into consideration is the possibility that impoverished families unable to afford the financial contribution may be forced to surrender their child to a full care order, with all the draconian consequences that entails. Given that Section 20 is usually a last resort undertaken by desperate parents who are denied help (by the same authorities) to keep a child at home, the idea of charging for the service is malignant and cruel.

A key “solution” proposed is to increase the outsourcing or “commissioning” of services to private providers via the bidding process. After years of savage budget cuts and a higher reliance on an inexperienced and temporary workforce, together with a sustained attack on wages and pensions, Bristol Children's Services are being driven into the dirt only to become a prime candidate for privatisation and profit-making.

The other proposal made is to use charities. But youth charity Young Bristol, for example, has had its council funding stopped and is now beholden to corporate sponsors, lottery funding and fundraising by volunteers. CEO Lee Williams said, “There should be statutory provision for all local authorities to provide youth provision for young people.”

Bristol is a microcosm of what is happening across the country to children's services. Earlier this month, in neighbouring Wales, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) said councils face a rising caseload with cuts to budgets. The latest figures show that there has been a 150 percent increase in the number of children going into care in Wales over the last decade, from 422 in 2008-09 to 1,050 in 2017-18.

Geraint Hopkins, deputy spokesman for children at the WLGA, said, “It's been a difficult period over these last 10 years. Austerity has hit many local authorities and whilst we have continued to meet the rising costs of looked after children, it's getting to the point now where we're really at crisis level.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact