

## 'Let them go to the theatre'

*'Qu'ils mangent de la brioche'* – 'Let them eat cake' - the notorious retort of the French Queen Marie Antoinette to the news that the peasants had no bread - is the sort of comment that could easily fall from the lips of Haringey's Council Queen of Muswell Hill, Claire Kober. In her recent statement on Haringey's retreat on its plans to cut spending on adult social care packages, Council Leader Kober declared that recipients of these funds would be able to take 'a trip to the theatre'. (We can only hope that Haringey residents show more mercy towards their regal leader than did the French revolutionaries who executed their queen shortly after hearing her condescending words.)

Only individuals with 'critical' or 'substantial' needs – such as severe learning disabilities, autism, dementia, and other complex problems – currently receive adult social care in Haringey. It is doubtful whether many of these individuals would be able to attend the theatre, and even if they could, few could afford the cost. What many of them do want is to attend day centres. As several representatives of Haringey People First made clear to councillors and council officials in the course of the recent (highly unsatisfactory) consultation process, they value these centres as places where they can meet friends, engage in leisure activities safely and get help from trusted support staff. Families and carers of individuals with dementia and severe learning disabilities also appreciate the day centres, not because they want to go to the theatre, but because they need some time for themselves and for other responsibilities.

Only last week, Cllr Kober declared, in a letter to local MP Lynne Featherstone, that budgetary constraints meant that cuts would 'inevitably' have to be made in spending on adult social care. Then, in her 'let them go to the theatre' statement, Cllr Kober announced that cuts in social care packages were not inevitable after all: the Council has found £5.7 m to cover the costs of these vital packages. However, in the same statement, Cllr Kober asserted that the Council was 'unable to reverse other proposals' – including plans to close three out of four day centres in the borough – 'without leaving an unbalanced budget'.

The Council's retreat on care package cuts confirms that there is nothing inevitable about cuts in spending on social care. Instead of surrendering in a spirit of fatalism to the dictates of the Coalition government and its austerity dogma, a coordinated challenge is required. Numerous commentators have asked why Haringey Council has decided to set a three-year budget a mere three months before the general election. The obvious answer is that the Labour Council has no confidence that a Labour victory would make much difference to the cuts in local government spending. But the threat to local government finances is a national problem that demands a national response. A lead on this matter from the Labour Party would not only be a stand for social justice. It would greatly enhance its prospects in the forthcoming election (are you listening Ed Miliband and Catherine West?).

Though the local government cuts are destined to fall most heavily on inner city boroughs, including several in London, there is a marked lack of a coordinated response as each council pursues a different strategy. A concerted response from Labour-led councils in London would

provide the strongest basis on which to challenge the government. It would also provide the ideal platform from which to launch Labour's campaign for next year's mayoral election (are you listening David Lammy?)

Haringey's about-turn on care packages shows that, even at local level, funds can be found to avoid damaging cuts in social spending. The Council still has the option of setting a budget at a level required to guarantee essential services and putting the case for raising the council tax to finance this to the people of Haringey. If the Council had any confidence in its slogan about 'building a stronger Haringey together' it would take a stand in defence of its services and not try to solve its budget problems at the expense of the most vulnerable people in the borough.

'Get real' was the response of Peter Morton, Haringey Councillor and Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, when challenged by members of Save Autism Services Haringey over proposed social care cuts at the Cabinet meeting on 26 January. Nobody knows better than the families and carers of people with autism and learning disabilities about the realities of social care – and the consequences of the service cuts that the Council is proposing. We say to Cllr Morton, to Cllr Kober and to the rest of Haringey Council, 'get real' with the people of Haringey and reverse these budget plans.