

Haringey's budget plans: 'reckless and irresponsible'

Last night Haringey Council Cabinet nodded through plans to cut its budget spending by around a quarter over the next three years, with 40% of the cuts destined to come from adult social care. The Council put up the barricades and turned out a small army of private security guards together with police to protect its councillors and senior officers from the wrath of the hundreds of residents protesting against what Mary Langan of Save Autism Services Haringey described in a speech outside the Wood Green Civic Centre as these 'reckless and irresponsible' cuts.

Protesters carried placards demanding 'Get Real Councillor Morton' – in response to the contemptuous dismissal of earlier challenges by the Cabinet member for Health and Wellbeing who is responsible for driving through the social care cuts. Other placards responded to Council Leader Claire Kober's suggestion that sparing cuts to care packages would allow people with critical and substantial disabilities to have 'trips to the theatre'.

Despite these protests – and deputations from affected groups concerned with issues from early childhood development to dementia care – the Cabinet voted in favour of the cuts package, hastily drawn up by Council leaders and rushed through a token consultation process over the Christmas holiday period. The campaign to throw out these ill-considered and destructive policies now moves to the full Council meeting on 23 February.

The Cabinet discussion – interrupted at regular intervals by protests from the public gallery – revealed the aloofness of the Council leaders from the serious concerns of local residents, their attempts to shift the responsibility for the budget deficit onto those in receipt of council services and the impracticability of their proposals.

Marianne Swannell, vice president of the National Autistic Society, explained to councillors why the services provided by a day centre such as Roundway are so crucial to people with autism – like her son Charlie. Zak, aged 15, with cerebral palsy, and Ibrahim, aged 18, with autism and learning disabilities, spoke articulately and passionately about the importance of the support they have received from the Markfield Centre in Tottenham. Reflecting the feeling of his peers that 'the Council don't value our lives', Ibrahim invited councillors to visit the centre and see for themselves 'how disabilities can affect people in real life'. Heather Martin spoke about the value of the expert care provided at the Haynes and Grange day centres, recognised centres of excellence in supporting people with dementia and their families.

The common themes here – and they were echoed by deputations representing children's centres and nurseries – was that the Council's plans reflected a lack of recognition of the particular problems facing individuals and families, and a lack of respect for the expertise of staff working in specialist services. Councillors did not seem to understand that autism and learning disabilities are life-long conditions, requiring stable, long-term, skilled support; or that dementia is a condition which tends to deteriorate, and people require more support as their cognitive function declines; or that families with complex problems need expert help with their children.

Whereas some councillors' questions reflected their remoteness from the experience of Haringey residents, others were inclined to invite representatives of particular groups to advise the Council on what alternative cuts they would propose in the quest to balance the budget. When Cllr Ann Waters asked how the increased demand for Council services could be reconciled with its shrinking resources, Anna Nicholson of the National Autistic Society replied bluntly that 'we are not here to do your job', prompting loud cheers from the public gallery. Families and carers for people with disabilities have difficulties enough without also shouldering the burden of Haringey's budget deficit.

Several speakers drew attention to the sheer implausibility of the Council's plans. Catherine Anderton of the Children's Centres Alliance observed that the Council had simply 'not thought through' the claim that it could cut the number of children's centres in half while providing services to the same number of children – it was, she said, 'completely impossible'. Similarly, Heather Martin pointed out the absurdity of the notion that the facilities and expertise of the dementia day centres could be readily replaced by home care services.

The exchange that best captured the vacuity of Haringey's cuts policy was that between Liberal Democrat councillor Pippa Connor and Cllr Peter Morton. Connor asked two questions. The first concerned the Council's notion that the Neighbourhood Connects scheme, a project based on using volunteers to visit people who are lonely or isolated, could replace specialist care services for the elderly. Cllr Connor asked whether a small pilot scheme, which was reported beneficial by 2.5% of respondents, provided a strong basis for adopting this model. The second concerned the scheme to replace day centres for people with disabilities with a social enterprise model: could Cllr Morton provide any examples of such schemes elsewhere?

Cllr Morton, who had already devoted much time to explaining the now-familiar retreat of the Council from the idea that 'reablement' programmes could produce a dramatic reduction in spending on adult social care, became even more flustered. On the first question, he mumbled and promised further consultation. On the second, he blustered for a while and then turned in desperation to the Council top brass lined up behind him and pleaded 'if officers have more detail that they would like to add'...only to be met with shrugged shoulders and stony silence. Behind him sat deputy chief executive Zina Etheridge, director of public health Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy, interim director of adult social services Beverley Tarka, head of commissioning Charlotte Pomery. Not one of them could help the Cabinet member for Health and Wellbeing answer two simple questions that go to the heart of the Council's plans to dismantle social care services and replace them with schemes that are utterly incapable of providing the specialist care that is essential for the wellbeing of people with a range of complex needs in the borough.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Haringey... Labour's shadow health minister Andy Burnham addressed on the same evening two meetings of the party faithful – one in Muswell Hill, the other in Tottenham. While Burnham outlined the Labour Party's plans for integrating health and social care at some time in the future, at a point approximately equidistant between the two party meetings, Haringey's Labour Council was voting to dismantle the infrastructure of

social care in one of London's poorest boroughs. As SASH representatives asked Burnham at both these meetings, 'what use is the Labour Party if it can't stand up for the interests of the most vulnerable in society?'

Michael Fitzpatrick, 11 February 2015