

“One Swindon”: austerity and the 'Big Society' come to Swindon

Public sector workers and service users to suffer the consequences

Readers of Swindon Advertiser will probably have read the report of a briefing given to Council workers about this new creature “One Swindon”, which could involve 1,000 workers losing their jobs. This is the local version of the coalition government's austerity drive, and the “Big Society” (read small state). It aims to set priorities for the town and “when fully developed” will replace the Council's existing Corporate Plan, its 2010 “Promises” and Swindon's “Local Area Agreement” as the “medium term focus for partnership working”. So now you know. All this will be done rather swiftly, the “fully developed” document being presented to full Council in November.

When the New Labour government was in office Swindon Council's Conservative administration was quick to tell us they did not want to carry out cuts, it was just that the New Labour government was under-funding the Borough. Yet now, with the coalition government in office, they can blithely announce that their government is going to cut our funding by something in the region of £30 million over 4 years, and they accept it *without a word of objection*. Yet the consequences are liable to be drastic, both in terms of jobs and services. The full consequences (aside from the threat to 1,000 jobs) will become clearer when the government's Comprehensive Spending Review is revealed this autumn. What is clear already is that such a level of cuts cannot fail to mean a worsening of the services provided.

In its document explaining what “One Swindon” is, or is supposed to be, Swindon Borough Council says that its central premise “involves shifting the balance of power, responsibility and resources away from public sector bodies like the Council to local people”.

The essential thing about “One Swindon”, we are told, is that the Council will “of necessity and design” (in reality as a result of the coalition government's austerity drive) “be a much smaller organisation, with a core purpose of commissioning and enabling services in partnership with the community.”

This is an agenda for privatisation of Council services, and for “the small state”. We are told that SBC cannot do everything, though, of course, nobody imagined they could. What they really mean is that they will not do what they currently do, because the government is putting the local authority on short rations, though it appears to be a diet that they think is “necessary”.

“Unsustainable in their current form”

When a trade unionist hears an employer saying that he is going to “empower” his workforce, the first thought is that he wants you to do more work for the same money, or wants you to take joint responsibility for “efficiency savings”, meaning less people doing the same amount, if not more work. So it is with Swindon Borough Council. The “empowering” of local people which “One Swindon” will apparently give us, amounts to allowing us to express an opinion on what services to cut. The premise of this policy - and the basis of which the Council wants to “engage in a meaningful dialogue with local people” - is that “public services are unsustainable in their current form”. A new “community based approach” is required, we are told.

What they really mean is that much of the work will be done either by private companies or by local residents. The recent news of the winding up of Swindon Camera Safety Partnership apparently means residents will have to operate speed cameras themselves! Perhaps this is their model for the future.

Much of the language of the Council document is vacuous and unclear, but you can pick out the bones of it. They say that there are four possible priority areas:

- Regeneration, employment, skills and managed growth;
- Cleaner, safer streets and protection of open green spaces;
- Sports, leisure and cultural opportunities;
- Providing a safety net for the vulnerable.

Regeneration, employment, skills and managed growth

If employment is a priority it is a strange policy for the Council to threaten to sack 1,000 Council workers. Unemployment in the town is already 7.1% (June 2010). Where are these redundant workers going to find jobs? Adding 1,000 workers to the dole queue will serve only as a drag on the local economy and deepen its crisis.

The Council says that every resident in Swindon should have access to "the right training and education" so they can work in the local area. But as many university students have found, education does not guarantee you a job. Indeed, unemployment is 35% for 16 and 17 years olds and 17% for 18-24 year olds. The coalition government's proposal to make older people work on beyond 65 poses the question of where are these young people going to find jobs?

We are told that:

"Economic-led growth will mean more housing growth, but it is important that this is in line with jobs, brings the kind of houses and communities we want and is supported by the necessary infrastructure."

Whilst the ending of housing targets determined at the national level, and by unelected regional quangos, is welcome, the Council, and their government have no clear housing strategy. What "kind of houses" do we want?, they ask; a question they don't answer.

Housing need in Swindon is reflected by the massive increase in families on the Council housing waiting list: now over 10,000. Whereas the previous government imposed bureaucratic targets, this government appears to be leaving housing to be determined by the market. Yet experience shows that private builders will not provide for housing need. They tend to produce speculative building which is beyond the means of much of the population.

What is required to address the housing crisis, is a new Council house building programme. Whilst the previous government belatedly abandoned their 10 year opposition to new council housing, the numbers they allowed were puny: 13 in Swindon, to be followed by another 25 or so. Yet the Tories have done nothing to address the need to build such housing. Indeed it appears that they will even cut back on the inadequate amount of money committed by the previous government for building.

Cleaner, safer streets and protection of open green spaces

"The challenge we face," says the Council, "is how to maintain and improve every street and every park in Swindon in these tough economic times". This priority, they say "brings into sharp focus the underlying principle of One Swindon". The Council cannot commit to delivering this with traditional services. Then mysteriously, "One Swindon would be the vehicle for asking what it is that we are all prepared to do to make sure our streets are cleaner and safer." Underlying this is the threat of privatisation of some services. But we may well be expected to clean up our neighbourhoods for ourselves.

If the Council wants to protect "open green spaces" then it should abandon its support for the proposed building adjacent to Coate Water. Council leader Rod Bluh made a public commitment that if there was no University there there would be no housing built in the area. He reneged on that commitment. Now that the Regional Spacial Strategy has been abandoned, together with the imposed housing numbers, there is even less reason for the Council to support 'development' near to Coate.

Sports, leisure and cultural opportunities

"Swindon Borough Council will investigate every option to support independent sports, leisure and cultural activities." Or in other words they will be looking to 'outsource' or privatise work currently carried out by the Council.

Providing a safety net for the vulnerable

"Swindon needs to target its limited resources on supporting and protecting those people of all ages who are recognised as being most at risk. To make an impact now and in the future we will need to take innovative approaches to work with individuals and families with complex problems."

What does this mean? It is based on the idea of the welfare state, not as the provider of universal services, for which people pay in their taxes, but as a social safety net 'of last resort' for the most needy. It is a justification for cutting services. The privatisation of the care 'industry' has created a low paid and exploited workforce. 'Personal budgets', introduced by the previous government, have led to some individuals employing their own carers, which creates an even more fragmented workforce, less open to public scrutiny and control of standards. It seems the current government is continuing down this line.

What's missing?

Whilst the document that the Council has produced is only a framework document, there are some serious omissions. There is nothing whatsoever about transport or the environmental crisis. We have already seen some cuts in local bus services. There are fears of a big cut in the Bus Service Operators Grant (which pays fuel duty for 80% of the fuel used by bus operators), or even its scrapping. A coalition of campaign groups and bus companies estimates that if the grant were scrapped it would mean 17,000 jobs being lost, as well as a 10% increase in bus fares. Less and dearer services would mean more cars on the road and more pollution.

"Engagement"

Swindon Council's ruling group makes much of its apparent desire to "engage" with local people and for them to be involved in decision-making. Yet the "engagement", the "meaningful dialogue" is rigged. The fundamental decision has already been taken, and local people are simply being asked about how the cuts should be implemented. To be involved in "co-creation", all we have to do is accept the premise that "public services are unsustainable in their current form".

The Conservative group may take its marching orders from their government but not many others do. They should remember that their austerity programme did not win a Parliamentary majority and their coalition partners (before they were offered Cabinet seats) condemned the extra £40 billion efficiency savings (which were to be added to the £73 billion of New Labour) as threatening to push the economy back into recession.

Local people will not be drawn into active engagement into the political process by a "dialogue" in which the decisions have already been taken.

Conclusion

The ruling group on Swindon Borough Council has far too readily accepted the proposals of its government. So much so that it shows that their criticism of the previous government was purely for purposes of party political advantage. They are proposing cuts which will impact drastically on the services that Swindon Council currently provides. "One Swindon" should be opposed for the reason that it will have negative social and economic consequences, and because the cuts are not necessary. It will be the poorest and most under-privileged in society who use public services who will suffer the consequences.

The danger of the current government's proposals to "cut the deficit" so swiftly is that the economy will go

back into a recession. According to the Treasury 1.3 million jobs will go over the lifetime of a parliament, as a result of the "efficiency savings": 600,000 in the public sector, and 700,000 in the private sector. The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development) reckons 750,000 public sector jobs will go. However, miraculously, the 'independent' Office of Budget Responsibility estimates that the private sector will create 2.5 million jobs over this period. During the height of the boom, prior to the 'credit crunch' it managed to create 1.6 million jobs, so the OBR guesstimate seems fantastic and fanciful.

Government spending is determined by political priorities. At the same time as proposing these cuts they consider it to be a priority to go ahead with renewal of Trident at the cost of tens of billions of pounds, money that could be put to socially useful purposes. What sense does it make to cut the jobs of Revenue staff when tens of billions of pounds are left uncollected? Many billions are also lost as a result of tax evasion by big business.

It is ironic that a crisis that was not caused by public spending but by the financial sector leads this government to make public sector workers and service users pay for the unsustainable debt in the financial sector; the result of an economy in which the financiers preferred to make money from 'financial instruments' (which were nothing other than fictitious capital, pieces of worthless paper) rather than productive investment.

Britain's debt is under 70% of GDP. At the end of the Second World War it was 250% of GDP yet this did not prevent the creation of the welfare state, in difficult conditions. The coalition government is selling people an austerity drive which is not necessary. Whilst this programme is presented as an "efficiency" measure, in reality it will lead to the wasting of resources, not least of human potential wasted by unemployment.

The latest Office of National Statistics Labour Market Bulletin for June 2010 shows the dire consequences that cuts in public sector jobs will have. As well as there being 2.47 million unemployed (a rate of 7.9%) there are 1.07 million people in part-time work *only because they cannot find a full-time job*. There are also 2,324,000 people who do not qualify as unemployed ("they do not meet the internationally agreed definition of unemployment because they have not been looking for work in the last four weeks and/or they were unable to start working within two weeks") but want work. All of these are chasing after only 492,000 vacancies.

Cutting public sector jobs does not only impact on the public sector. According to the Treasury the impact of the coalition government's austerity measures will make 700,000 redundant in the private sector as a result of loss of work they do for the public sector.

In Swindon the 8,700 people unemployed are chasing only 1,326 vacancies. To this can be added some who have taken part-time work only because they cannot find a full-time job, and some who are 'economically inactive'. What sense does it make to add an extra 1,000 people to those chasing so few vacancies?

The task of those opposed to these cuts is to explain why they are necessary and to try to draw together trades union and service users/organisation to campaign in defence of both jobs and services.

Martin Wicks

August 13th 2010