

COMMENT

by Geoff Martin

Editor in Chief

@geoffmartin07

geoff.martin@hamhigh.co.uk

Here we go again: libraries are the soft target for more cuts

Does it say something about the mentality of our council officers and elected representatives that libraries are always under threat, a soft touch where hundreds of thousands of pounds can be shaved away at the drop of a hardback.

The proposal in Barnet to cut almost £3million for the libraries budget is as alarming as it is bizarre: remote CCTV will monitor libraries instead of staff for up to 70 per cent of the opening hours.

This has all the hallmarks of another ill-considered scheme from what many people are now referring to as 'Barny Barnet' as it strives to replace people with machines and the work of committed employees with unproved automated processes. Soon it might be possible to walk around Barnet's offices without seeing another human being gainfully employed: what could be better?

The latest news from Camden is less dramatic but worrying. Its libraries will have fewer staff and shorter hours under proposals to save almost a million quid.

While saying that no libraries will close, Cllr Abdul Hai, the man in charge of spending on culture and communities, admits "very significant cuts" and a restructuring which will no doubt see some library workers joining the dole queue and fewer staff to help people when they are using what for them is an extremely important and indispensable public service.

You could be forgiven for believing that the council's library folder is at the top of the pile and always within easy reach when cuts are being considered... the go-to service when a few hundred thousand pounds need to be saved.

George Osborne has challenged councils to raise money for social care (because he won't provide it) by raising council tax by two per cent but a mere percentage point of an increase would be enough to maintain and even expand library services in every borough.

Let's not forget that if it were not for communities themselves, there would be barely a library left in Camden. Councils undoubtedly gamble that people care enough to run them voluntarily, but aren't councillors supposed to take spending decisions based at least to some degree on what people want them to provide?

It's an old trick: make it important for people to help you save money, then when they've done precisely that, demand that they help you save even more, ever endlessly until every last penny has been milked.

Already over a ten-year period millions will disappear from the library spend in many London boroughs, as councils continue to view them with the ruthless eye of profiteers hell-bent on getting rid of anything that doesn't add to the bottom line.

No wonder people believe that where libraries are concerned, councils know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

“

You could be forgiven for believing that libraries are at the top of the pile when cuts are being considered yet a mere percentage point increase in council tax would be enough to maintain and even expand them in every borough

! What do you think? Have your say at streetlife.com

Autumn statement

Police cuts abandoned but we remain vigilant

Tulip Siddiq, Labour MP for Hampstead and Kilburn writes:

The past month has seen two major Government u-turns, on cuts to tax credits and over massive reductions to the police budget. The Labour Party can take great pride in forcing the Government's hand, but we must remain focussed on the challenges ahead.

Proposed cuts to tax credits posed an immediate threat to the economic welfare of thousands of working families across the country. Labour consistently opposed this measure, before and after the election. I am proud to have spoken in Parliament along with many of my colleagues against these changes.

However, George Osborne's assault on Universal Credit means these measures will happen all but in name. We must be resolute in demanding the Government stop their attacks on those trying to make work pay.

It was also a great relief to hear that proposed police cuts were abandoned in the Autumn Statement. Andy Burnham led the way in arguing that planned cutbacks of up to 25 per cent would have signalled the beginning of the end for neighbourhood policing.

In the last five years, police forces across England and Wales have lost 12,000 front-line officers. Further cuts over the next five years could have led to the loss of over 20,000 more.

Thanks to pressure from safer neighbourhood teams and opposition MPs, it looks like



the police budget is secure, for now. However, we cannot be complacent when it comes to the safety of residents.

People here in Hampstead are crowdfunding because they are worried about their safety. This sets a worrying precedent for London.

I made it clear on BBC radio that cuts were unacceptable as we've already lost the Hampstead police station and levels of crime have risen. The next Mayor must put policing at the top of their agenda.

The past month has shown that the Government's majority is a fragile one. The months ahead, particularly with the EU debate gaining momentum, will continue to test its durability.

Labour must show a united front to force further u-turns where they matter most. I will give my all in contributing to that opposition.

Andrew Dismore, Labour London Assembly member writes:

The Chancellor's unexpected, but welcome, statement that the police grant would be protected will not see the huge reduction in the numbers of officers the Met Police Commissioner was warning would follow, but the Met is not out of the financial woods. The Met still has budget pressures of £400m to find over four years, half the original expected cut.

So the previous savings options remain on the table, including the changes to rank structures, cross borough working, reductions in the police estate, and the future of the PCSOs, which will be decided in January. The Met is still not properly reimbursed for its Capital City function: the grant for this is £174m but the amount spent is £340m. The national formula which would have cut the Met by £184m has been taken back for further reworking, so it remains an open question as to how this will turn out next year.

Another major threat comes from the cut in local government funding. This puts at risk the non-statutory, discretionary work councils do, for example the funding of CCTV schemes and diversionary activities for young people at risk; or the 'buy one get one free' deals some councils operate: London boroughs directly fund 338 police officers.

So the Met's finances remain under strain and when combined with the impact of local government cuts community safety still remains a major challenge.

Radicalisation

Compassion and gratitude for a teacher suffering family tragedy

Nichi Zander, Louise Camrass, Lukman Ahmed, Lucy Baron Thompson, Lucy Weatherburn, Elena Paolini, Ivan Drake, Laura Bacharach, Linda Stevens, Sultana Begum, Khadiza Bibi, Anthony Charlton, Nanna Sandom, James Sandom, Dick Ward, Jude Liknaitzky, Dawn Verrall, Stephen Verrall, Kate Barker, Nicola Kohn, Clare Connellan, Ariadne Birnberg and Gemma Mitchell, of the Torriano Primary School community write:

We are parents in the Torriano Primary School community, who feel strongly that national tabloid newspaper coverage misrepresented the views of



Torriano Primary School parents in the matter of a staff member whose adult children ran away to fight in Syria – a family tragedy of which she was found to be an innocent victim by police and

Prevent officers.

At a recent information evening held at the school, we did not see angry parents. We saw compassionate and sympathetic parents keen to share their support and gratitude for this member of staff who cares and works hard for the children she educates. We saw parents rightly defensive of our local inclusive school, which is an outstanding example of tolerant, compassionate and inclusive British values.

We are satisfied that Torriano Primary School keeps our children safe and that they have acted quickly and appropriately in line with robust policies to ensure students are protected and safe to learn and grow.