

Redbridge Concern for Mental Health

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“The strong do as they wish, while the poor suffer as they must.”¹ Why are mental health services being targeted?

A few weeks ago Mervyn King the governor of the Bank of England placed the blame squarely on the financial sector for the economic crisis of 2008. What relevance has this you may well be asking for us folks in Redbridge? Well, as a result of the financial crises and the resulting economic turmoil Redbridge Council must save £25 million. As the cutters sharpen their knives users of local mental health and social services are being targeted.

Yesterday, at the Redbridge Cabinet meeting the decision was made to ‘defer’ and ‘review’ the closure of Abury House and the Progress Day centre. We have asked the local authority to clarify what this means and we are eagerly awaiting their response.

In the meantime, let’s explore why some of the proposals emerging are targeting the poorest, most vulnerable and politically powerless groups in our society? This is particularly puzzling because the last time I visited Ley Street and Abury House I didn’t come across any bankers, financial whiz kids or hedge fund managers. So, why are people with mental health conditions and other social excluded groups being targeted?

Let’s be clear, it is not because we have spent too much on hospitals, schools, freedom passes and welfare benefits that we are in the current mess. Successive governments have been trumpeting responsibility and self-help. It is, ironic, therefore that people with mental health conditions are now being asked to take personal responsibility for a mess which is not of their making.

Redbridge Concern for Mental Health would like to thank, praise and congratulate all the local mental health service users and their allies for the commitment, effort and determination over the last few weeks to challenge and fight these proposals. Not only do they have to deal with the day to day challenges of being a service user they are now having to campaign and challenge local policy makers to maintain services and levels of care that society should be providing simply by virtue of being civilised.

Why do I think this is the case? Firstly, study

¹ **Thucydides** (c. 460 BC – c. 395 BC) was a Greek historian and author of the History of the Peloponnesian War, which recounts the 5th century BC war between Sparta and Athens to the year 411 BC, Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thucydides>

after study demonstrates that people with mental health problems are one of the most excluded groups in society. They are blighted by stigma and discrimination which can, according to Professor Thornicroft, a consultant psychiatrist “*pervade every part of everyday life: personal, home and family life, work aspects of citizenship, even people’s ability to maintain a basic standard of living.*” Often people with mental health conditions are denied access to jobs, education and healthcare and can also be shunned by neighbours and colleagues, from playing a full part in our communities.

Moreover, poverty is a dominating feature in the lives of many service users. As Peter Campbell eloquently explains destitution robs people of “effective control of their destinies as well as diminishing the quality of day-to-day existence.” Without access to appropriate housing, a sufficient income, and freedom from violence, meaningful employment; adequate access to health and social care and respect and dignity how can we expect people to lead flourishing and meaningful lives.

I’ve also noticed that people on welfare benefits, users of social and mental health services are now being subjected to repeated attacks. As we sit in judgment on others and force people off benefits and out of day centres, will we really save millions?

The evidence suggests otherwise. Instead of saving money, this approach is much more likely to damage lives and our communities. In a recent piece of research in the British Medical Journal Martin McKee, professor of European public health argues that “radical cuts in social welfare spending to reduce budget deficits could cost lives as well as causing economic pain”².

A good example locally is the Freedom Pass. Some of our service users are already paying the price. We work with people who tell us that they will be unable to attend college courses, day centres and other social activities if they have to pay £1 or so to travel. All mental health and social care professionals will tell you that social relationships, in particular, feeling close to, and valued by, other people is a fundamental human need and one that contributes to functioning well in the world and also acts as a buffer against mental ill health.

So apart from exacerbating social exclusion and social isolation the decision to withdraw freedom passes also flies in the face of economic sense. If someone with a mental health condition relapses as a result of social isolation and social exclusion and lands up at Goodmayes Hospital, a week on an inpatient ward - I’ve been reliably informed - is the equivalent to the cost of a freedom pass.

We are asking policy makers and local councillors to be brave and preserve the mental health and social care budgets. And at the same time we are asking you to continue to campaign and fight for services that society should be providing simply by virtue of being civilised.

Notes for Editors

Redbridge Concern for Mental Health – established over 15 years ago – is a leading third sector organisation in the London Borough of Redbridge dedicated to promoting, improving and protecting the mental health and emotional well being of the wider community.

² Stuckler et al Budget crises, health, and social welfare programmes, British Medical Journal, 2010; 340:c3311

We offer high quality services to local residents seeking mental health support. We also provide information and signposting as well as challenging the stigma and discrimination that people experience in their everyday lives.

We also play a key role in Redbridge working with partners and stakeholders to influence the design, delivery and management of local mental health services.