

# Rethinking service provision in Redbridge

## The Redbridge Coalition – all cuts and no vision

In response to the cuts imposed by the government, the local Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition in the London Borough of Redbridge has embarked on a savings programme which makes very serious reductions in all areas of Council provided public services.

Since May 2010 the leadership of the Council has focused on restructuring senior management and finding across-the-board savings.

What it has failed to do is to work out a vision of what its priorities are for the future, and to examine seriously all of the alternative means of providing high quality local services to reflect it.

Having a savings programme without a vision or a sense of direction means that it is impossible to justify any individual service cut or redundancy.

There has been a long series of ministerial statements unjustly critical of Councils up and down the country designed to undermine them in the eyes of their electorates. It is now apparent that this is an attempt to soften us up for the governments recent announcement that the services currently provided by Councils could, in future, be run by the private sector.

## Defending public services and offering alternative means of delivery

Elected Councillors have a duty to defend the public services on which people rely for a decent standard of life. The Council has a responsibility for the provision of many of these services, but as the representatives of local people we also have a duty to defend services which are not provided by the Council, for example local health provision : we must protect local hospitals and strive to keep the NHS public.

Most of the cuts planned for Redbridge for the next three years involve diminishing the range and quality of front line services. We will vigorously oppose these cuts in the Town Hall and out in the community. We will not accept privatisation.

However we believe that now is the time to promote a serious examination of the way that services are delivered and to offer a range of new ideas which we believe would improve provision.

There are many current examples of Councils creating partnerships with other Councils to share services, and Redbridge should be willing to engage with others. Savings can be achieved through such an approach, but in the design of joint services also affords an opportunity to take stock and design services which put the users first.

Whether through sharing services or redesign of existing Redbridge services, our suggestions offer opportunities for local citizens to be empowered and for the role of the Council to be changed, not diminished. Our suggestions offer opportunities for better services in terms of quality and value for money, but this is not a cuts- driven agenda

## Involving Residents and Service Users

The Council carries out lots of consultation, but this is not the same as working with residents in a particular geographical area, or groups of people who use a particular service, in design and delivery on a partnership basis.

We should no longer rely wholly on professionals and Councillors to decide, in isolation, what is provided for the service users without their direct input . There are many examples outside of Redbridge of how such partnerships between Councils and their citizens are working, ranging from local residents running environmental clean up schemes and community facilities, to community led commissioning of social care, to the establishment of user and employee-led mutuals running centres for disabled people.

## New Partners

The redesign of services along these lines will involve organisations who are already Council partners providing services to residents. This includes many organisations in the “voluntary sector”. Rather than cut grants to the sector and reduce the amount of commissioned services, the Council should expand the role of the sector. Some services would be better provided by other types of not-for-profit organisations. All of the contracts should contain safeguards which ensure accountability to elected members.

## Volunteering

This approach will create some volunteering opportunities. Volunteering should be ‘incentivised’ and volunteers should not be used as cheap substitutes for Council employees. By incentivised we mean that relevant rewards are given for involvement in service design and/or delivery. Examples include skills training, timebanking , free access to some Council services.

## Equality

Some of the recent decisions to cut services in Redbridge have meant hitting the most vulnerable residents and residents who already live in neighbourhoods where there are environmental problems. In the redesign of services equal access to a good quality of life must be a guiding principle

## Real Localism

There are many different neighbourhoods in Redbridge, each with its own issues. Area Committees offer an excellent opportunity for local residents to come together to offer their views, voice their concerns and make their complaints. However they do not offer sufficient opportunities for people to become engaged in the design and delivery of public services in their own areas. More funding for projects at this level would provide more opportunities to support the new approach to service provision.