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AUSTERITY AS THREAT?

Slip Sliding Away: A case study of the impact of public sector cuts on some of the services supporting children's play opportunities in the city of Sheffield in the north of England

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Introduction and methodology

This paper explores the impact on some of the provision for play, and to a lesser extent sport, of financial expenditure cuts in the city of Sheffield in northern England. This paper is exploratory, undertaken in the early stages of the process to begin to understand something of the situation. The research that underpins the paper was undertaken in a purposive manner for the Play in Times of Austerity seminar (see McKendrick et al., in the introduction to this collection) over a short period of time during April and May 2013. The methodology comprised three elements: an analysis of publically available documents sourced through an online search, three interviews with key informants with some interest or responsibility for the provision of play in Sheffield, and an informal discussion with a group of volunteers involved with an adventure playground in the north of the city.

The interviewees were: a member of staff from Activity Sheffield who discussed information which was publically available; the Manager, together with input from staff members of a long established charity supporting pre-school learning; and an individual who for ten years managed a Sure Start centre in one of the most deprived areas of the city. An ethics review was undertaken and approved by the author's departmental Research Ethics Committee.

The information gathered provides insight at one particular point in time as to how public spending cuts are affecting key aspects of the service provision pertaining to children's play, and to a lesser extent sport, in Sheffield. Two cautions should be acknowledged: first, there are many others involved in these matters across the city who were not interviewed; and second, in the time between undertaking the interviews and writing this paper and its publication public sector funding cuts have continued and the context of funding and facilities will have changed, presumably to intensify the dis-benefit to children and play opportunities.

Strategic level support

The City of Sheffield is the fourth largest city in England and has a population of 551,800 (Sheffield City Council, nd, a). Activity Sheffield provides 'play, dance, sport and healthy activities for all ages across the city' (Sheffield City Council, nd, b). From the financial year 2011/2012 the budget for Activity Sheffield was £2.1 million and this reduced to £1.4million in 2012/13 and £1.0million in 2013/14: a reduction of over 50% in three years.

Funding external to the local authority had been available from sources such as national government and the BIG Lottery for projects including the Homeless Play Project (Sheffield City Council, 2013), and the BIG Lottery, the Play Builder programme (which supported the redesign and build of outdoor play spaces), and Kids Can Do (a programme of activities including play workers to support children's activities between 2008 and 2013 – Sheffield City Council, nd, c). A Play Partnership, bringing together a range of individuals and organisations interested in play

across the city existed from 2007 to 2010. Similar organisations were established in many English cities, because they were an integral part of the national drive at that time to support play (Play England, 2011). Following the 'austerity cuts' that were introduced by the new UK Government after the general election of 2010, the Play Partnership in Sheffield combined with other city organisations to become Go Sheffield, where the main interest and driver is sport and not play. Activity Sheffield used to support various sports including athletics, football and swimming; the former are no longer supported and the latter is now being supported for one final year. Cuts to play services are equally severe. Rangers worked across the play and parks sectors providing play-related activities, such as events in parks, holiday clubs, bug hunts, pond dipping and two sessions a year in each primary school. The budget for Rangers was reduced from £700,000 to £350,000 and their role was reduced to only undertaking woodland maintenance. In addition, organisations such as the Out of School Network; the Sheffield Information Link and the Sheffield City Childcare Network all disappeared in 2012.

A sector in decline I: Reduction of Sure Start early years provision

The funding for the early years sector has reduced over the past two years and the city council was expecting a further £6.8 million reduction in the Early Intervention Grant (EIG), received from national Government, in the 2013/14 allocations. Additionally, in future years, the EIG will be incorporated into the Revenue Support Grant (RSG), rather than being separately identifiable. The RSG is also facing further budget reductions in 2014/15. The inclusion of the EIG into the RSG will result in specific funding for early years being lost and the possibility that the transparency of early years funding will become obscured, and the pressures on funding that was ringfenced for early years may be increased, in the future..

The Sure Start programme was initiated by the Labour government and in Sheffield 36 Sure Start Centres were established. As a result of the public sector funding cuts these were reorganised into 17 Children's Centres, each covering a larger geographic area, in 2013. In addition, grants to 16 childcare providers in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector and to four providers in the statutory sector have ceased. In the early days of the Sure Start programme there was a direct relationship with the Government Regional Office. In 2005/6 the funding and relationship was devolved from the Government Regional Office to Local Authorities. At first, the funding was ring fenced. However, as the money available has reduced (the £10 million budget for the Sure Start service in Sheffield was reduced to £4million by 2011), the ring-fencing was removed. Thus early years funding has supported play through Sure Start Centres and Provision for such play opportunities has contracted as Sure Start centres have closed.

A strong feeling was expressed by one interviewee that partly as a result of the early years sector sitting within the City of Sheffield's Directorate of Children's Services alongside Education, and partly as a consequence of Sheffield being a large city, the early years sector had low political priority locally, and much less than the interviewee and other workers would have liked. One Sure Start centre, first established in 2002, now operates with a single desk and telephone. This centre serves 1,600 children in deprivation. It previously employed 36 staff (18 full time equivalent) with the capacity to engage families speaking 16 different languages. The budget of this centre has reduced from £800,000 in 2002 to £260,000 in 2011 and at the time of interview had a staff level of 3.5 full time equivalent. Subsequently this was closed in September 2013.

A sector in decline II: the death of a long established charity?

A national charity which works to support the early years sector was established nationally more than 50 years ago and 47 years ago in Sheffield. During the last five to ten years, as the range of external funding sources has declined, the Sheffield office has increasingly supported work in the neighbouring towns of Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster. In 2010/11 the Sheffield office's income was £400,000. This reduced to £360,00 in 2011/12; £330,000 in 2012/13, and £0 in 2013/14. The local organisation is surviving for six months on funding from the assets of the national organisation, while it seeks to establish other funding.

These financial reductions means that the organisation is no longer able to support development work in 25 settings each year to assist with the appraisal of the quality of indoor and outdoor play areas for OFSTED inspections. There has also been a cut in safeguarding training and an abolition of the Special Needs Project which was supporting 45 children and families when the funding was withdrawn on 31 March 2013, and which had supported about 1800 individual children with special needs, and their families over a 13 year period.

Overall, the concerns of this charity are that both the safety and the quality of early years settings in Sheffield and across the wider South Yorkshire Region will be compromised. Currently, early years settings with a 'good' OFSTED report obtain Government funding and the charity is concerned that without support some of these settings will not be able to retain their 'good' rating and will therefore lose their funding. The charity has already received feedback from staff in the settings it supports. The staff have articulated concerns about: losing on-going support; a lack of awareness about new initiatives; having no-where to go to for help when they experience a crisis; and not being able to draw on assistance for future staff recruitment.

On the positive side, the charity considered that it was now operating in a more business-like manner, improving the way in which it communicated internally, and was being more innovative than hitherto. However, not all changes were necessarily welcomed; it realised that it would have to change its philosophy and that future work may not always be engaging disadvantaged communities.

Individual provision: what future for adventure playgrounds?

Sheffield has two adventure playgrounds, both in relatively deprived areas with multi-cultural communities; one to the north and the other to the south of the city centre (Sheffield City Council, nd, d). A sum of £176,000 used to be allocated annually for both adventure playgrounds, which facilitated the opening of each centre for five hours a day, five days a week. As part of the 'austerity cuts', closure was proposed for both adventure playgrounds at the end of March 2013. However, both playgrounds had considerable community support and campaigns were organised to contest the proposals (e.g. Sheffield City Council, nd, e).

Sheffield City Council agreed to transition arrangements for each facility being open for three hours a day, three days a week for two months until the end of May 2013. The member of staff from the city council suggested that the two adventure playgrounds were quite different in terms of their physical and social context. The site to the north of the city centre (Pitsmoor Adventure Playground) is characterised thus:

- It has more traditional self-build features. It is therefore 'higher risk' and Sheffield City Council do not consider that it can become an 'open' playground;
- It is not located on a bus route and not easily seen;

- It is next door to a rehabilitation centre, which means that when the adventure playground was staffed any issues arising from this could be dealt with;
- There is not a group of people who are ready and able to continue the on-going management of the site;
- The first public meeting was attended by 30-50 people, but only six or seven people showed an interest in saving the site a few months hence.

In contrast, the Council Officer summarised the context of the site to the south of the city (Highfields Adventure Playgrounds) thus:

- It contains less self-build elements than the other adventure playground, meaning it would be easier to convert to an 'open playground';
- It is open for younger age groups;
- Some parents use it as a child care facility;
- It has the support of the local community forum;
- It is located on a bus route;
- It has a group of committed people who support its continued existence; one of whom is a teacher of vulnerable children at a secondary school, but who works with children in the playground.

In light of these differences, the Council Officer felt that it was more likely that the Highfield Adventure Playground would succeed: partly because it had the possibility to become an open access playground, but also because it had a group of people whom it was considered could take the future management of the site forward.

A small group of individuals at the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground to the north of the city centre, which was established by parents in the mid 1970s, felt aggrieved at the way that the City Council had made the decision to reduce the hours and threaten its closure. Their understanding was that the financial calculations that the City Council had undertaken comparing the financial support to sports vans visiting parks, which Activity Sheffield provided at times such as school holidays, and to adventure playgrounds had not been undertaken equitably. They also felt very strongly that the social and community benefit of the adventure playground was not being taken into account. The site was used by forty, sometimes up to one hundred, children most days after school and just two weeks earlier an event had been held that had attracted 250 people. The police go to the adventure playground and play football and organise mountain bike sessions with the children building up positive relationships. The perception that the council was underestimating the social importance of the site was also partly driven by an understanding and knowledge that when children are not at the adventure playground, some of them are mixing with adults who are drug dealing and that there had been a local drug-related gun murder in recent years. Concern was also expressed that the users of the playground would not be in a position to go to the lengths of constituting a voluntary organisation to take the site forward. It was considered that any such organisation would need enabling support (a point also acknowledged by the Council Officer) and therefore was different from the other adventure playground in the city.

Subsequent to these interviews, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground was indeed closed until further notice (Sheffield City Council, nd, d). At the time of writing, Highfields Adventure Playground remained open as an adventure playground, but with reduced hours of three hours per day, for three days a week (Sheffield City Council, nd, d). Back in April and prior to the closure of Pitsmoor, evidence was emerging of its pending decline; two days before I visited this

adventure playground the slide had been removed by the City Council with the explanation that it was 'unsafe'. Apparently no risk benefit analysis had been undertaken for the slide. The slide had slipped away.

Conclusion: move from City Council to local community management

Across the City of Sheffield, services and support for children's play are being dramatically reduced. Negative impacts will result from the decrease in budget to Activity Sheffield; changes within the Council's budget that will result in early years funding not being ring-fenced; reorganisation of Sure Start centres; cuts in funding to charities and community organisations; loss of adventure playgrounds; loss of staff to support play (and sport or environmental activities); together with issues such as financial cuts to the parks and countryside service; and changes in local governance. Cuts will no doubt continue to be introduced and services will no doubt continue to contract at different levels: strategic and city; sector; and individual site and delivery. The Council Officer who was interviewed reflected on the situation expressing that they felt like saying to people: 'you have some support now . . . you can't rely on us forever . . . we aren't going to be here'.

This can all be understood within the context of the fact that for many years Sheffield marketed itself as The National City of Sport, being designated as such by the Sports Council in 1995 (Local Government Chronicle, 1995). Yet, it has now closed, and in late 2013 demolished the award-winning Don Valley Athletics Stadium. If it is forgoing one of its most prestigious sports facilities what does this mean in the longer-term for all public facilities, parks and people supporting children's play – are they set to 'slip slide away' like the slide at the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground?

Two and a half years since the original research all Local Authority funding has been withdrawn from the adventure playgrounds and the charity supporting early years provision. The sixteen Sure Start centres exist with a much reduced service with some now being in libraries and primary schools and the previously used buildings being vacant. From the City Council web site it appears that much of what is now offered is a range of clinics and information about other activities (<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/education/information-for-parentscarers/care-support/childcare/childrens-centres/valley-park.html>) [Accessed 2.9.15].

Pitsmoor Adventure Playground is being managed by a charitable organisation established by local people, has qualified staff and is open for three hours a day, four days a week both in term time and school holidays. (<https://pitsmooradventureplayground.wordpress.com/>) [Accessed 2.8.15].

Highfield Adventure Playground is managed by the Sharrow Community Forum with a community group, Friends of Adventures, supporting the playground. It is staffed and open for three hours a week on three days in term times and as advertised in school holidays. They are also about to re-introduce loose parts on the site. (<http://sharrowcf.org.uk/highfield-adventure-playground-2/>) [Accessed 2.8.15].

So the savage cuts to public sector funding has closed some of the provision where children were supported in their play. However there are three notable changes for these longstanding facilities. First both adventure playgrounds are now being run by local community groups not the Local Authority. Second there is a re-introduction of loose parts. Third there is a focus on a risk benefit approach rather than the risk assessment approach previously adhered to by the City Council. These three changes alone indicates that the adventure playgrounds are becoming more

characteristic of the original adventure playground movement which is perhaps an unexpected benefit of the withdrawal of local authority funding.

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