

World Social Work Day and Boot Out Austerity Blog

I first came across the celebration of World Social Work Day (WSWD) last year but hadn't done anything to mark the event then. This year though at a local authority third sector consultation event I ran into a friend and colleague Bridgett Bennett who I used to work with. She was organising an event to celebrate the day and asked if I would like to be involved. I said yes and that I would host a stand at the event to showcase palliative care social work and the work the social work team at our hospice does. I also agreed to get in



Bridgett Bennett WSWD event organiser and me

touch with the social workers in our local children's hospice to get the perspective of palliative care social work with adults and children. I thought that as well as celebrating the event and catching up with some old social work friends it would be another good opportunity to keep on track with our aims I spoke about in my first APCSW blog which was to keep helpful relations with social work colleagues in statutory services.

The day totally surpassed my expectations. There was really good representation from across the whole spectrum of social work practice in the local authority. One stand included information about the worldwide perspective of social work practice. This was presented in a really interesting way and there was a quiz about the differences and things influencing social workers practice in other countries that to be honest had me scratching my head and asking for the answers, all good fun though. The event



Palliative Care Social Worker Tina Forrester and me at the palliative care social work stand

opened up to the community in the afternoon and members of the public came into view the stands and talk to social workers and other people working in the health and social care sector. The theme of the importance of valuing community and

environmental sensitivity were woven throughout. This was really highlighted by a performance group called Masque whose performers have learning disabilities. They delivered a performance of dance and song which spoke about the importance of communities being inclusive and accepting of each other.



Performance Group Masque

When thinking about the stand to showcase palliative care social work I was clear on how I would focus on community. Some palliative care social workers have been key in the development around the ideas of public health approaches to palliative care and compassionate communities and this is something I have been really interested in for some years now. The focus on building stronger communities is also a key part of the Ambitions



Linda McNee and Angela Ward Palliative Care Social Workers from Donna Louise Trust Children's Hospice

Framework for the development of palliative care services in the coming years.

I was a little unsure though at first about how I was going to incorporate the idea of environmentally sensitive development though. That was until I read BASW's memo on World Social Work Day celebrations though and the links to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Global Agenda for Social Work and Social

Development. The theme of the event was linked to one of the aims of the global agenda 'Our Role in Promoting Sustainable Communities and Environmentally Sensitive

Development'. When I read more about this I began to understand that this was about community capacity building as a response to environmental challenges that can be natural in origin or manmade. This included food insecurity which is a real issue in the UK now as despite its wealth has seen a continuing rise in the use of Foodbanks. According to data from a new report from the anti-poverty



World Social Work Day at Kings Hall Stoke on Trent

charity, The Trussell Trust, between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017 its network provided 1,182,954 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis compared to 1,109,309 in 2015-16. Of this number, 436,938 went to children. The increase in use has been particularly evident in areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out to single people, couples and families, which have seen a 16.85% average increase in referrals for emergency food, more than double the national average of 6.64%. The Stoke on Trent Foodbank which was seeded by the Trussell Trust provided 9216 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis between 1 April 2016 to 28 February 2017 which amounted to 94 tonnes of food.

In respect of these challenges I used the palliative care social work stand at the event to focus on the work that the palliative care social work team at the hospice does in

collaboration with other partners like the local Foodbanks and the independent benefits advisory service provided by Disability Solutions which aims to minimise the harmful effects of recent welfare reform on the people we support and of food insecurity they can experience.

In the course of speaking to social workers, social care workers and people with lived experience of using services and the effects of food insecurity, the theme of policies of austerity and the damage to communities they have caused became a common one throughout the day. One of the concerning stories I heard was about a person who had previously attended the local authorities supported workshops but since the closure of them had been travelling around all day on buses as they felt they didn't have anywhere else to go or anything else to do.

The theme of the harmful effects of austerity is one of concern amongst social workers both nationally and internationally and during the planning for the WSWD event I had become aware at the beginning of March about a protest walk that British Association of Social Workers (BASW) were organising to raise awareness about the impact of austerity. The march would be an alliance of social workers, other social care workers, service users, carers and other concerned citizens who would be walking from Birmingham to Liverpool over seven consecutive days. When I saw that the march would be coming through Stoke I decided that this would be a good opportunity to get involved and help to raise awareness and voice my concerns. I spoke with the APCSW committee and we were agreed that we would be supportive of the march and communicate information about it to the membership. I contacted Guy Shennan BASW Chair who was organising the march and



Boot It Out marchers arriving in Stoke

agreed to help spread the word amongst social workers and organisations I work with and who have an interest in challenging policies of austerity. On Friday 21st March I met the Boot Out Austerity walkers as they came into Stoke Town Centre and arrived at the Glebe Pub. The walkers were full of cheer and energy, amazing given the amount of miles they had already walked. Thirsts were quenched with some quality Joules ale amongst

other refreshments and then we proceeded onto a local restaurant for an evening entitled 'Social Work and Samosas'. There was a really good atmosphere and songs of protest were being sung before the meal including the key catchy tune that I would be



Social Work and Samosas

singing for the next day and for weeks to come 'From Birmingham to Liverpool in 2017, we'll march for the rights of those who can't fight, boot out austerity!'. After the marchers refuelled on some delicious food we heard from some great speakers, Linda Holt Teaching Fellow in Social Work, Jennifer Pardue and Angela Glendenning, about their views on austerity and social work role in challenging it. I spoke a few words and cited some statistics and other sources of information regarding effects of austerity in Stoke on Trent. A BBC documentary entitled 'The Year the Town Hall Shrank' had previously highlighted the difficulties and damage the drastic cuts in public spending would create. When filming started in 2010 the Council was facing a £36 million short fall in funding. In the following years care homes, day services, Sure Start Centres, public libraries, swimming pools and toilets would all close. Many the services and facilities we have lost will be lost forever and that is the real shame. Given that at the time the documentary was aired in 2012 one in four in the city were unemployed, Stoke was also the sixteenth most deprived area in the country and that the Council was the largest employer it wasn't going to be difficult to understand how damaging these and the continuing cuts in the years that would follow were going to be. In April this year the Chair of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Mohamed Pervez called for a Welfare Reform Cumulative Impact Analysis to assess the social impact of welfare reforms eg change from DLA to PIP, Universal Credit introduction, benefit caps, bedroom tax and changes to working tax credits were having on the population of Stoke on Trent and followed the publication of a similar report in Liverpool.

A 2013 report from the Children's Rights Watchdog for England estimated at the time that there were ½ million more children in poverty in the UK. In 2015 the chair of Stoke on Trent's Children and Young Peoples Committee advised of £4.7 million overspend and 609 children in care (up 72 from the previous year) and said that austerity had a role in this and that numbers would likely continue to rise if austerity doesn't stop.

When looking at statistics like these the phrase 'We are all in it together' has a hollow ring and when considering the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report in 2013 which showed that there were higher proportion of cuts to public services in poorer areas than there were in the more affluent ones. A United Nations report also considered the reforms as breaching the human rights of disabled people and unfairly discriminating against already disadvantaged and poor people.

This discrimination was also further evidenced by report from the Centre for Welfare Reform Think Tank in 2014 and that coalition measures eg cuts in benefits and local authority funding had been targeting at those already poor and disadvantaged.

Despite austerity measures though the national debt still continues to rise and plans to eliminate budget deficit have now been abandoned but the austerity project is set to continue into the 2020's with public spending expected to be lower in the next few years than it was in 2010-11 levels with an estimated £40 billion budget deficit. These problems could also be potentially made worse depending on how the economy does in the coming years. If the current government remains in power and continues with its current plans it

appears its aim is to try and reduce the deficit solely through cuts in public spending and welfare reform. When it follows this line of policy, for example, the change from Widowed Parents Allowance to Bereavement Support Payment which Childhood Bereavement Network estimates will leave bereaved parents with children as much as £12,000 worse off at the same time as making changes to inheritance tax that benefit only approximately 26,000 wealthy families / 0.04 % of the population of England and Wales with an estimated cost to tax payers of £1 billion over the next three years it is clear that austerity is an ideological choice that is harming the most vulnerable in society and worsening inequality and poverty. That is why I, like the other social workers marching, in keeping with our principles and values to promote human rights and social justice and to address issues of inequality and discrimination wanted to raise awareness of the impact austerity is having on the people we work with and support in the hope that we can influence and help to change current government policy.

Although as palliative care social workers we work with other organisations to help reduce the negative impact of welfare changes and cuts to health and social care budgets and try to ensure people get the support they need as we do at our hospice with Disability Solutions and the local Foodbanks, I am really concerned that that if the aforementioned predictions prevail then the worst is yet to come making the task all the more difficult.



Gathering at the Rafiki Centre

After the Boot Out Austerity marchers had refuelled on curry and rested the night, it had been the first night they had slept in beds for three nights, we congregated at the Asha Rafiki Centre in Hanley, Stoke on Trent the next day for the Stoke to Sandbach section of the march. Before we set off we hear from the manager of the centre, Godfroide about the work they do in supporting asylum seekers and refugees. Mohammed Pervez the local leader

of the City Labour group spoke about the impact of austerity on the people of Stoke on Trent and his support for an impact analysis report. We heard from Nigel Hall IFSW's Human Rights Officer about austerity from an international perspective. Then with some more offerings of poetry and songs sung, all the people who had gathered set off with enthusiasm and pace and marched up to Hanley town centre to gather at the town



Godfroide from the Rafiki Centre

hall where Guy was interviewed by Radio Stoke and the local Sentinel newspaper. As we proceeded on I spoke with social workers from other local authorities and social work lecturers and it reminded me of one of the great benefits of being a member of the association and the value there is in meeting and talking with other like minded people.

Sadly I had to part ways at the half way mark but understood that the marchers continued to receive well deserved recognition along the way in the guise of Jeremy Corbyn who was in Crewe that day and he called Guy to convey his support and solidarity with the marchers.



Mohamed Pervez speaking



Marching on to Hanley Town Hall

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Boot Out Austerity marchers and social workers at the WSWD event for their efforts to raise awareness about the impact of austerity and social issues it has caused and the role social work plays in addressing these issues. You have all been a great inspiration and reaffirmed my belief in the value of social work as a profession and the positive influence we can wield when we come together to act.

Kevin Chesters, Midlands Representative, APCSW

Douglas Macmillan Hospice