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Coping with the Cuts? The Management of the Worst Financial Settlement in Living Memory

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Abstract

The scale of the cuts to local government finance, coupled with increasing demand for services, has led to unprecedented ‘budget gaps’ in council budgets. Arguably, two competing narratives of the trajectory of local government have emerged in which contrasting futures are imagined for the sector – a positive story of adaptation and survival and more negative one of residualisation and marginalisation. Drawing on case study evidence from three English local authorities, the paper distinguishes and provides examples of three strategic approaches to managing austerity – efficiency, retrenchment and investment. It demonstrates how and why the balance of these strategies has shifted between the early and later phases of austerity and considers the extent to which the evidence of the case studies provide support for either the survival

or marginalisation narrative. The paper concludes by arguing that a third narrative – responsibilisation – captures more fully the trajectory of local government in England.

Key Words:

Austerity coalition poor communities localism

Notes

1. This paper reports some of the findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project Serving Deprived Communities in a Recession.

2. A Scottish case study is also being conducted as part of the bigger project.

3. These were tackled in the context of a council-sponsored Fairness Commission which aimed to be informed by wider considerations of fairness: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/socialrenewal/engagement/fairnesscommission/documents/fairnessreport.pdf

4. http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/leisure-tourism-and-culture/sport-leisure-and-community/background-info

5. A ‘roof tax’ or infrastructure tariff is levied on developers and is designed to cover towards 75% of the costs of the infrastructure necessary to support development, with the shortfall theoretically made up by central government grants provided in support of growth, including the new grant – the New Homes Bonus.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

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Annette Hastings is professor of urban studies at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow. Her recent research deals with the nature and causes of urban inequality, focusing on how local services can contribute to maintaining as well as tackling inequality. She is the author, with Peter Matthews, of ‘Bourdieu and the Big Society: empowering the powerful in public service provision?’ in Policy and Politics, 2014.

Nick Bailey

Nick Bailey is professor of urban studies at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow. He is interested in the analysis of poverty and inequality, and in neighbourhoods and spatial inequalities. He is the author, with K. Besemer, G. Bramley, and M. Livingston, of ‘How neighbourhood social mix shapes access to resources from social networks and from services’ in Housing Studies (forthcoming).

Maria Gannon

Maria Gannon is a research associate in urban studies in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses on the nature and extent of poverty and inequality and the public’s attitude towards vulnerable groups. She is the author, with N. Bailey, of ‘Attitudes to the “necessities of life”: would an independent Scotland set a different poverty standard to the rest of the UK?’ in Social Policy and Society, 13(3).

Kirsten Besemer

Kirsten Besemer is a research associate at the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Environment and Real Estate in the School of Energy, Geosciences, Infrastructure and Society at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. Her research has focused on poverty and social exclusion, with particular reference to local services, housing/homelessness and financial exclusion, and on equalities issues and neighbourhoods. She is the author, with Peter Matthews, of 'The "Pink Pound" in the "Gaybourhood"? Neighbourhood deprivation and sexual orientation in Scotland' in Housing, Theory and Society, 2015.

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Glen Bramley is professor of urban studies at the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Environment and Real Estate in the School of Energy, Geosciences, Infrastructure and Society at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. His recent research has focused on planning for new housing, modelling the impact of planning on the housing market, housing need and affordability, low-cost home ownership, poverty, deprivation and the funding and outcomes local services. He is the author, with D. Watkins, of 'Housebuilding, demographic change and affordability as outcomes of local planning decisions: exploring interactions using a sub-regional model of housing markets in England' in Progress in Planning, 2015

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