



OPEN LETTER TO COUNCILLORS PAUL DIXON AND RAY BALLMAN

BY EMAIL

CRISIS IN EMERGENCY SOCIAL WORK PROVISION

Dear Councillors

You will recall that I wrote to you in June 2023 to advise you of a serious threat facing the Emergency Duty Service (EDS), which provides out of hours social work support. These staff are employed by Childrens' Services, but provide emergency mental health services to support adult social care.

We warned you that the flawed approach of the pay and grading review was putting the service at risk, as extremely skilled staff would leave. We had also met the council leader, Jim Robbins, and in July we met with the deputy leader, Emma Bushell.

GMB sought to bring our concerns to Labour councillors in private, and in good time, so that the problems could be averted without the need for strike action.

Although SBC have now put a sticking plaster over the issue of the proposed pay cut, no binding assurance has been issued to staff that the additional monies will not be removed in the future, and the method of implementation is not legally robust. Our dispute therefore remains live.

The intransigent attitude of council officers and the lack of urgency has led to a steep drop of morale by EDS staff, as we warned you would happen, and two Approved Mental Health Practitioners (AMHPs) have now left the role. It is a statutory obligation to provide AMPH cover on a 24/7 basis, every day of the year. Currently SBC are not in a position to guarantee that. Previously, four of the seven strong team were AMHPs, and when a non-AMPH was on shift, an informal cover arrangement was in place.

The situation is that there are now only two AMPHs, and no formal arrangement in place for AMPH cover. The informal arrangement is stretched beyond breaking point. GMB have tried to discuss this with senior council officers, but your officials refuse to talk with us about it. As I am sure you know during the recent strikes, on two nights these same senior officers failed to provide emergency cover, and GMB knows of four calls that were missed putting vulnerable children and adults at risk. This was despite GMB warning officials of this risk, and offering to provide emergency cover.

Frankly, you inherited a system from the Conservatives that was working well, Labour councillors were warned of threats to that service, and you chose not to act in time to avert those threats. This was a failure of leadership. At any time Labour cabinet members could have picked up the phone to GMB, to discuss ways to avert the threats to the EDS service. You chose not to do so.

Swindon Borough Council is now locked into a dysfunctional industrial relationship with GMB, where despite us having a non-trivial membership in the council, and several

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serious issues that our members wish us to take up with SBC, the council officers have made it quite clear that they prefer confrontation with GMB to negotiations. This was a situation that Jim Robbins had earlier offered to resolve, but he seems to have broken that promise.

It is not too late for Swindon Borough Council to step back from the path of confrontation, and solutions need to be found, in the interests of the clients and service users who rely on the skilled professionalism of these social workers.

Please feel free to contact me on 0754 0859 227 or email me on andy.newman@gmbactivist.org.uk if you require further information.

Best wishes

Andy Newman

GMB branch secretary