'In the current climate…': young people in spaces of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity

Preface: just waiting…

An interview with a youth group manager in the English Midlands, May 2013:

> "In the current climate…we're just waiting for the inevitable to happen…We're expecting our funding to be cut – *completely* cut – in the next six months, maybe the next quarter. I wouldn't be surprised if we've only got a few weeks left...We're keeping things going but…it's a really anxious, heartbreaking atmosphere for everyone working in this sector".

Introduction

This paper develops a case for interdisciplinary research examining everyday geographies of public sector 'austerity', 'economic crisis' and 'neoliberalisation'. In particular, I reflect upon qualitative research at one publicly-funded youth group in the English Midlands, and develop three main claims. First, I outline how long-run processes of public sector 'neoliberalisation', and more abrupt cuts to public sector expenditure 'in the current climate' of austerity politics, have substantially transformed geographies of childhood and youth in diverse global contexts. I also argue that extant research on these transformations has tended to reproduce some rather partial understandings of *impacts of service withdrawal*, which I critique via a reading of recent work on anticipatory geographies. Second, I explore how, in one case study, political-economic contexts of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity have constituted a particular atmosphere and sense of the future, tangibly affecting everyday relationships, spaces and the efficacy of service-provision. Here I underscore the wider significance of *anticipated* futures, noting that anticipation of funding cuts is having manifold everyday, lived consequences which are arguably more wide-ranging, intractable and troubling than impacts of funding cuts themselves. Third, in particular, I argue that anticipations of funding cuts in England are frequently characterised by an intensification of anxieties about, and hopes for, young people's futures. I note that young people are diversely

affected by, and engaged in, the circulation of these anxieties and hopes – but also recognise that young people's geographies *go on*, and sometimes offer hopeful ways on, 'in the current climate'.

'In the current climate': 'neoliberalisation' and austerities

Empirically, this paper considers a particular mood or atmosphere: the experience of 'just waiting' for funding cuts 'in the current climate' of services for children, young people and families in England. This notion of a 'current climate' is presently widely used by practitioners, services-users and publics in this context. For example, over the last decade, practically all major reports published by UK public, voluntary and charitable organisations that work with children, young people and families employed this metaphor to describe a challenging mess of prevailing political-economic conditions, wherein anxieties about cuts to funding, staffing and services have become a characteristically-normative background to many working lives (Davies and Evans 2012, FPI 2012a, CCN 2013, NCB 2013). In the context of English public services, the 'current climate' metaphor often conflates two sets of interconnected processes.

On one hand, although the 'current climate' is widely figured as a relatively recent (post-2008 global financial crisis) situation, the metaphor conflates a series of much-longer-running changes to the systemic and operating conditions of UK public, voluntary, charitable and third sector organisations, which are often labelled as 'neoliberalisation' (Jessop 2003, Geddes 2011). While I share concerns about the totalising, contested metanarrative of 'neoliberalisation' (Barnett 2005, Roy et al 2012, Peck 2013), the large body of geographical research animated by this concept has been significant in disclosing heterogeneous processes and deepening trends (Larner 2003) which characterise diverse organisational-institutional spaces in many post-1945 economies. Generically, here, 'neoliberalisation' denotes a repertoire of interlinked, long-run drives towards organisational rationalisation and cost-effectiveness, where budgetary efficiencies, funding cuts and staffing pressures have become normative, 'unavoidable' 'realities' in diverse contexts (Peck and Tickell

2002, Newman 2013). In English public services such logics became especially, distinctively deeply-rooted, inevitable-ised and well-developed over the last three decades, as successive national governments valorised and extended strategies of service 'modernisation' 'reform' and 'renewal'. In effect, these diverse reform-ist policies shared and deepened an approach to public sector managerialism characterised by efficiency measures, tight performance management, competitiveness, public-private partnership (Shaw 2009) and openness to principles of "marketisation and privatisation, whether frontally or incrementally introduced" (Hall 2003 22). For example, it is widely evidenced (Garrett 2009, 2014, NCB 2011b, NCVYS 2011, NSPCC 2012) that publicly-funded organisations providing services for children, young people and families in the UK have been increasingly characterised by: (i) shifts toward marketization, privatisation and outsourcing of service-provision, whereby an increasing proportion of formerly-public-sector services are delivered or rationalised by private sector providers or via deinstitutionalised public-private partnership; (ii) discourses of 'best value', and 'outcome-driven' or 'payment-by-results' models of service-provision, whereby only services proven to deliver specific, tangible outcomes and 'returns on investment' are deemed 'core' funding priorities; (iii) operational experiences of periodic restructuring, remodelling and refocusing of service-provision, whereby management, workforce, responsibilities and priorities shift because of redundancies, or rationalisations of job specifications and organisational structures. In England, impacts and forms of these long-run processes have varied significantly by regional and local political contexts and economic preconditions (Newman 2013). For example, in the Local Authority discussed in this paper, a succession of elected members with ideological commitments to reducing public expenditure led the development of a model, during the early 2000s, for service-delivery predicated upon substantial streamlining of 'non-essential' services and a radical degree of outsourcing to private sector partners. The strategies enacted through this model (subsequently and explicitly adopted by many other Local Authorities in England) thus prefigured local responses to the 2008 global economic crisis.

On the other hand, the 'current climate' widely denotes a series of specific national, regional and local policy responses to the 2008 global economic crisis (Kitson et al 2011). A large body of work within Economic/Regional Geography has begun to map the complex, uneven causes and impacts of this 'crisis', particularly as manifest in risk-exposed institutional, regional and urban spaces in Europe and North America (French et al 2009, Kitson et al 2011, Peck 2014, Crescenzi et al 2016). This work has been key in evidencing how many national governments managed risk-exposure and budget deficits arising from banking/financial sector crises by adopting austere public spending policies, whilst devolving responsibility for implementation of those austerity measures to increasingly local agencies and actors (Peck 2012, Donald et al 2014). As is widely noted, many governments have developed specific post-2008 programmes of public sector austerity and downsizing, with particularly pronounced austerities in contexts with: extant long-run experiences of public sector 'neoliberalisation'; significant exposure to economic risk following banking/financial sector crises; and/or incumbent governments with ideological commitments to 'rolling-back' public expenditure (French et al 2009, Peck 2012, Crescenzi et al 2016). In England, for instance, major, abrupt cuts to public sector budgets have been made by Conservative-led governments since 2010, most iconically in the *Public Spending Review* (HM Treasury 2010), which established a strategy to reduce national public spending by £81billion by 2015. In effect, this review constituted a substantial, sustained, multi-sectoral programme of public funding cuts, normalised via political/media discourses of necessity, urgency, public-sector-profligacy, and being-'all-in-this-together', and enacted by passing-down decision-making and commissioning powers – and responsibilities for administering many cuts – to Local Authorities (Featherstone et al 2012, Davies and Evans 2012).

On average, the *Public Spending Review* led to a 27% real terms reduction in funding available to each of England's 353 Local Authorities between 2010-15 (Hastings et al 2015). However, uneven regional and local geographies of service-provision have been constituted by English Local

Authorities' diverse orientations towards, and practical handling of, handed-down budget cuts (Hastings et al 2013). As in analogous international examples (Peck 2012, 2014), Local Authorities with already-long-sustained commitments to 'roll-back' 'neoliberalisation' have tended to press the case for especially dramatic, stringent, multi-sectoral post-2010 cuts in funding for local public services. For example, the Local Authority discussed in this paper has, since 2010, repeatedly emphasised the necessity of intensifying and accelerating long-run strategies of local public sector downsizing, via a succession of severe cuts to the Local Authority budget: subtracting £68million in 2010, £133million in 2011, £40million in 2013, £126million in 2014, £66million in 2015, £148m in 2016, and so forth. The simultaneity and rapidity of service cuts constituted in local political-economic 'climate' is producing complex, multiple, compound impacts for service-users and for public, voluntary, charitable and third sector organisations (Hossain et al 2011, FPI 2012a, NCVO 2011). In particular, a distinctive feature of English post-2010 austerity politics has been a significant, disproportionate reduction in budgeted spend for local services for children, young people and families (NCVYS 2010, Children England 2011, NCVO 2011). Emergent research suggests that, since 2010, English Local Authorities typically made the largest proportion of their budget savings via cuts to this sector (FPI 2012b). Certainly, most English Local Authorities have reported unprecedented downscalings of provision for young people via wide-ranging service withdrawals, hours reductions, staffing cutbacks, or closures of spaces and projects (NSPCC 2011, Unison 2014). In most Local Authorities, including the case study described here, non-statutory services for young people have been especially exposed to budget cuts via policy discourses which figure play, leisure, recreation and community facilities as 'non-essential' and 'unviable', whilst framing diverse forms of long-term preventative work or participatory youth engagement as 'unproven' and 'resource intensive' (NCB 2011a, 2011b, NAVCA 2012).

Anticipatory politics and anticipated geographies

Through this paper, I develop three critiques of the large, international body of geographical and social-scientific research which has been so important in rendering explicable the processes outlined in the preceding section. First, I critique the way in which analyses of these processes have tended to focus mainly upon state- or city- scaled consequences of public sector austerities (Meegan et al 2014, O'Brien and Pike 2015, Knieling and Othengrafen 2016). While this mode of analysis has been key in explicating spatial consequences of this political-economic moment for urban/regional governance and public sector service-provision (Peck et al 2013, Donald et al 2014), a tendency to derive metrics from national- or city- scaled data has produced relatively few spaces in which everyday – and perhaps more subtle, personal, local – emotional-affective consequences of policy-making and political-economic change can be voiced and written (Horton and Kraftl 2009a). Certainly, extant research in this context has produced relatively thin descriptions of ways in which "actually existing" 'neoliberalisations' (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Larner 2011) and austerities are experienced, enacted, lived-with and responded-to, within diverse everyday geographies and communities (Hastings et al 2015, Beatty and Fothergill 2013). Through a focus upon one relatively small publicly-funded service for young people in an English neighbourhood, I argue for the value of qualitative, hyper-local, community-based modes of research in affording understandings of what Peck (2012 632) calls "the politics of everyday austerity at the street level, where…effects of public-service cutbacks, job losses and increased exposure to socioeconomic risks are experienced in daily life, in workplaces, households and the public sphere".

Second, I critique the way that many existing studies have worked with some very particular presumptions about the temporality and causality of political-economic processes like 'neoliberalisation' and austerity: i.e. how political-economic change can often be figured, in this context, as a linear process whereby *policy decisions cause funding cuts which have impacts*. Recent geographical work on the politics and governance of anticipation – ranging across

international relations (Aradau and van Munster 2012), environmental futures (Boyd et al 2015) and civil defence (Young et al 2014) – prompts keen critical scrutiny of this kind of assumption, or directs attention to more complex notions of causation at work within extant scholarship. In particular Anderson's (2010, 2011) theorisation of 'anticipatory political action' diagnoses an array of discursive, technical and affectual processes of 'acting-in-advance' which have increasingly become integral and taken-for-granted in contemporary political practices. Anderson (2010 779) highlights particular forms of policy discourses/practices through which anticipated futures are folded, efficaciously, into diverse present-day contexts; wherein anticipated futures are "disclosed and related to through statements about the future; rendered present through materialities, epistemic objects and affects; and acted-on through specific policies and programmes". Studies of examples like civil contingencies planning, emergency preparedness exercises, and 'pre-emptive' military strikes illustrate how anticipated futures are disclosed, rendered-present and acted-upon in this way (Anderson and Adey 2011). Indeed, it might be argued that work of this ilk has predominantly focused on anticipatory political practices relating to issues which are large-scale, high profile, and vividly dramatic, disruptive, spectacular and anxiety-inducing (e.g. terrorist incidents, military threat, civil emergency, epidemic outbreak). However, I argue that insights of geographical research on anticipatory politics provide important prompts for – but also may be extended via – research exploring other (smaller, less obvious) kinds of anticipatory political action, in other (local, everyday, perhaps less noticeable) politicised spaces.

Importantly, notwithstanding this latter critique, geographical accounts of anticipatory political action call attention to the prevalence of anticipated futures in governmental discourses, and their importance in securing consensus, action or policy-intervention in the immediate present. The aforementioned English *Public Spending Review* exemplified this instrumental mobilisation-of-anticipated-futures as substantial public spending cuts were rationalised (and rendered

'unavoidable', 'urgent') by invoking imminent risks to 'future generations' and long-term economic prosperity:

> "The *Spending Review* sets out how the…Government will carry out Britain's unavoidable deficit-reduction plan. This is an urgent priority to secure economic stability at a time of continuing uncertainty in the global economy and put Britain's public services and welfare system on a sustainable long-term footing…As international bodies such as the IMF and OECD have noted, reducing the deficit is a necessary precondition for sustained economic growth. Failure to take action now would put the recovery at risk and place an unfair burden on future generations" (HM Treasury 2010 5).

I will consider how this rationality has fuelled, deepened, extended and legitimised senses of a 'current climate', and thus generated particular atmospheres and futurities, in particular spaces of public service-provision. For example, the Local Authority discussed in this paper predicates its strategic plan for 2014-19 upon the 'reality of the current climate':

> "The reality of the current economic climate is that we can no longer take any form of government funding for granted…Our key income streams from the government are rapidly diminishing and we do not see any change in this position in the future. As a result we will: continue to act more commercially as an organisation; seek to maximise…innovation…to help generate more income; look to ensure our assets are true commodities that give us a clear return on investment" (Local Authority 2014 25).

Moreover, research on anticipatory political action directs attention to the multiversal rhetorics and affects of futurity which are in-play within many contemporary policy discourses, and the multiple configurations of people, materials, technologies and representations involved in, and constituted by, particular acts of anticipatory political action. As Anderson and Adey (2011) observe, such

configurations are typically characterised by a considerable degree of spatial-processual-evental complexity (and, often, messily unpredictable material-affective contingency); and they suggest that this complexity and contingency is too-often underestimated in many conceptualisations of governance and governmentality. Indeed, in my reading, this observation marks a somewhat critical stance against the grain of social scientific accounts which have sometimes threatened to focus overwhelmingly upon rather muscular, manipulative, strategically-causal impositions of bio/political power. Certainly, at least, this critique should require accounts of political-economic issues and discourses to acknowledge and accommodate more details, subtleties, complexities and contingencies than is typically the case. So the following analysis should be read as a consideration of the ways in which an attentiveness to local geographies of anticipation – even within one relatively small, contained space of service-provision – can challenge presumptions about the temporality and causality of processes of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity.

Third, I critique a limited attention to the diverse experiences of children, young people, families and service-providers living-with 'neoliberalisations' and austerities. As Hall (2015) and Pimlott-Wilson (2015) argue, to date few studies in this context have involved primary, qualitative research with children, young people and families, despite the complex, compound, apparently-disproportionate impacts of these 'neoliberalisations' and austerities for these social groups. Moreover, I suggest that geographies and atmospheres of anticipation 'in the current climate' are particularly poignant and important for researchers engaged in work with children, young people and families. For, as Evans (2010) and Ruddick (2007) show, children, young people and families – or normative notions of childhood, youth and family – are frequently targeted within contemporary forms of anticipatory politics, and figure centrally in policy discourses which seek to legitimise neoliberalising and austerity strategies (e.g. via appeals to the interests of 'future generations'). Such discourses are part and parcel of a wider preponderance and actancy of hopes and anxieties for/about children and young people's futures within many geographical settings, wherein

normative social-cultural anxieties are frequently underpinned by particular widely-circulated senses of children's and young people's futures (Kraftl 2008). The following analysis demonstrates how discourses of austerity politics are not only predicated upon, but also strongly generative of, local hopes and anxieties for/about children and young people's futures. In so doing, I also contribute to critical discussions of temporalities within the subdiscipline of Children's Geographies. Here, it is increasingly argued that, though foundationally predicated upon critiques of socio-political and biological constructions of children as 'becomings' and 'future citizens' (and thus predicated upon critical, social constructionist understandings of temporality), geographical work with children and young people too-often "seems subliminally stuck within a linear or even static understanding of time" (Worth 2009 1050, also Horton and Kraftl 2006, 2008, Hopkins and Pain 2007, Brown 2011). I contribute to this range of critiques by considering the importance of anticipated futures in/for some contemporary young people's geographies, and evidencing how young people's geographies and senses of the future are being recast in the 'current climate'.

Research in a space of anticipated service withdrawal

The remainder of this paper reflects upon three qualitative research projects conducted at one particular space of service-provision for children, young people and families in the English Midlands. This relatively small (single room) space is located in an urban community which among the 10% most socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods in England according to the 2015 *Index of Multiple Deprivation*. This building is the venue for: a youth group/café for 11-16-year-olds; daily play, support and social sessions for parents/carers with preschool children; and a programme of community arts and environmental projects and events. These activities are typically staffed by three full-time employees and pool of fifteen part-time/sessional practitioners, and funded through a combination of central government, Local Authority, and charitable funding. However, as in the prefatory quotation, at the time of writing it was anticipated within the organisation that each strand of funding, staffing and activity, was at risk of being 'cut'.

In 2007, 2009 and 2013 I received funding from this organisation to undertake qualitative research with its staff, practitioners and service-users. These projects were designed to gather independent benchmarking and evaluative data, in line with statutory evaluation and reporting requirements for publicly-funded organisations of this kind. Over the three projects I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 staff/practitioners, 100 young people (aged 11-16) and 30 parents/carers engaging with organisation's provision. In each project, the vast majority of staff/practitioners, young people and parents/carers presently engaged with the organisation opted-in to the interviews. Broadly reflecting the demographic diversity of the neighbourhood, around 60% of each group of interviewees were white-British, 15% were born in Somalia, 10% were born in Poland, and 10% were born in India. Interviews were conducted confidentially in a small meeting/consultation room adjacent to the main activity space. Interviewees could opt to participate individually or in groups. Typically, staff/practitioners opted to participate in one-to-one interviews, whereas young people and parents/carers opted to be interviewed in small friendship groups.

The projects' remit, timescale, and logistical practicalities required the interviews to be relatively structured, efficient, consistent and 'to-the-point', with consistent data collected in each project. To this end, a relatively short interview schedule was developed, with questions designed to elicit reflections about: role in, or usage of, the organisation's provision; observed outcomes of the provision; and recommendations for enhancing the provision. Despite this relatively structured, circumscribed format, interviewees were very often moved to reflect, much more broadly, upon the 'current climate' and its implications for the organisation's future, and these surfacings of feeling and reflection are foregrounded in the following thematic analysis. As I shall detail, the earlier rounds of interviews refracted concerns with ongoing, long-run processes of Local Authority 'neoliberalisation', whereas the 2013 interviews were more immediately framed by anxieties about national austerity politics. This series of interviews thus affords a longitudinal view of implications of public sector 'neoliberalisation' and austerity measures for everyday geographies in/of one

particular space designed for children, young people and families, and thus at the intersection of national and local political-economic context previously outlined.

In the following sections I discuss two major themes which recurred in interviewees' broader reflections upon the 'current climate'. First, I explore their various, shifting, interrelated discussions of the 'atmosphere' constituted by the 'current climate'. I note that this atmosphere has evidently impacted substantially upon friendships, working practices, service-provision, and senses of the future within the case study community. Second, I explore how anxieties about, and hopes for, young people's futures have apparently become intensified and efficacious within this context, although young people's geographies *go on*, nonetheless.

Atmospheres and anticipated futures

In each round of research, most practitioners described their work at the case study organisation in terms of a particular, pervasive 'atmosphere' or 'climate'. In 2007 and 2009, this climatic metaphor was specifically used to evoke an apparent context of 'perpetual change' – characterised by anxieties about recent, impending or suspected redundancies, restructuring and disinvestment – within the Local Authority. Although they did not use the term, issues raised in these discussions certainly closely corresponded to processes critiqued in accounts of 'neoliberalising' public, voluntary, charitable and third sector organisations.

> "It's a very target-driven atmosphere, the way services are commissioned now. On a day-to-day basis you're just totally focused on meeting targets,…balancing the books. Our priorities are to do with targets and budgets and nothing else…It doesn't necessarily mean you can't do things effectively, but at the end of the day you're…delivering services with less money, fewer staff" (practitioner, 2007)

> "We're used to working in a climate…where the only constant thing is perpetual change. We're in constant fear of the next restructuring, the next round of redundancies, the next money-saving brainwave" (practitioner, 2009)

In 2013, most practitioners again mobilised notions of 'climate' or 'atmosphere' and by-now-familiar anxieties about funding and service withdrawal were cited. However, their discussions were typically scaled-up (to the youth/family work sector as a whole) and amped-up (via the language of 'austerity' and 'swingeing' 'cuts'), often with specific reference to the aforementioned 2010 *Public Spending Review*.

> "We have to accept we're working in a climate of real austerity – the whole sector is experiencing really swingeing cuts…That colours everything we do here" (practitioner, 2013)

> "You can see…when you meet anyone who works in the Council or any of the services, anyone who works with children and families – people are wondering what's going to be cut next and by how much, and there's an atmosphere that…people are expecting it might be 'goodnight' for all kinds of services that have proven to work well" (practitioner, 2013)

Despite a shifting political-economic context, several characteristic motifs recurred in interviewees' talk about/around the 'current climate' in all three research projects. First, practitioners, young people and parents/carers valued the opportunity to 'vent' or 'share their feelings' about the 'atmosphere' within the organisation. These 'feelings' were articulated via a shared lexicon of 'heartbreak', 'hopelessness', 'low morale', 'stress', 'strain' and 'tiredness', providing some moving, faltering evocations (Horton and Kraftl 2009a) of emotional-affective geographies of service-provision within this political-economic context.

> "It breaks your heart to see morale so low. The atmosphere is pretty bad to tell the truth. In team meetings everyone is so stressed. You see some team members…so tired, feeling the strain of juggling everything and keeping the show on the road…It is good to vent about it but I can't see things changing anytime soon" (practitioner, 2007)

> "In the current climate it is **so** hard to keep smiling…We've achieved so much in the last three years – it breaks your heart to think they might cut it all. It's enough to make you lose hope" (practitioner, 2009)

Second, interviewees' discussions were overwhelmingly shot through with anxieties about the future of service-provision within this space. At each stage, practitioners, young people and parents/carers anticipated that redundancies, restructuring and funding cuts were imminent, and would imminently impact, distressingly, upon service-provision.

> "You do wonder how long we can keep it going – you…yourself thinking the next [Local Authority] budget meeting might mean it's 'curtains'…There is forever talk of redundancies or restructuring just around the corner" (practitioner, 2007)

> "The way I see it, you have to make the most of this [service] while it lasts because you can never be sure how long they will be allowed to continue" (parent, 2009)

> "I admit I have read things…about cuts in the Council. They're talking about cutting millions of pounds so I don't know what that means for us" (female, 16, 2013)

I would argue that this mode of anticipatory anxiety has become a long-run, ever-present – perhaps infrastructural – feature of many spaces of service-provision in contexts of public, charitable and

third sector 'neoliberalisation' and/or austerity. I also contend that this anticipatory anxiety matters, and has impacts, in/of itself. Or, to put it differently, none of the futures anticipated in the two following quotations has actually happened (yet); however, as I shall illustrate, the anticipation of these futures has had a range of troubling, continuing, lived, felt consequences for practitioners, young people and parents/carers within this community.

Third, several interviewees evoked ways in which these anxieties about the future have proven to be 'catching' (i.e contagious), and have been circulated via all manner of encounters, gossip and looping feedback between practitioners, young people, parents/carers, local residents, councillors, and agencies within this community. Again, I note the complex temporalities in process here: these are not impacts caused by funding cuts, but rather a series of impact-ful situations and interactions set in train by the *anticipation* of funding cuts.

> "There's a lot of gossip about what might happen next – there's always gossip, it's really catching. I go to [Local Authority meetings] and everyone has heard from a friend of a friend of a friend about what might be happening, and it spreads…and it impacts on you. You can't help it. Although it might not happen, as soon as someone says something about possible cuts or redundancies, it creates a level of stress, particularly when word gets out to service-users: they're like 'oh my god, what am I going to do?' It's very distressing" (practitioner, 2009)

> "You can tell [youth worker] is *stressed*. They're worried about the way things are going and that makes us…feel worried and upset about what happens next" (Female 14, 2013)

However, the 2013 research witnessed a tonal shift in interviewees' anticipations of the future of service-provision at the case study organisation. In 2007 and 2009, anticipatory anxieties were generally accompanied by a discourse of 'business as usual': a sense that anxieties were

manageable, and that 'coping', 'keeping going', 'fighting together' and 'liking a challenge' were 'just what we do' (and had been 'ever thus'). This 'spirit' and 'tenacity' was evoked by practitioners, young people and parents/carers alike.

> "Coping with pressure…dealing with funding cuts and keeping going…it's just what we do – we thrive on a challenge! It's business as usual…part and parcel of the job and the sector, and to be honest it was ever thus. We're used to having to grin and bear it" (practitioner, 2007)

> "[Practitioners] do a hard job and you have to respect their spirit – they keep going, they're tenacious. They handle all kinds of stuff to keep the [service] up-and-running and make it right for the community" (parent, 2009)

In 2013, however, I noted that anxieties about the future had typically taken a darker turn. It was reported that the atmosphere had 'shifted a bit' from 'business as normal', and widely anticipated that impending funding cuts would be 'terminal'. These anxieties were chiefly explained in relation to an imminent review of budgets for local youth provision. Although the organisation had been broadly successful in sustaining its services, many interviews talked in terms of 'bitterness', 'loss of faith', 'the light going out', 'thinking the unthinkable' or 'the stuffing being knocked out' within the organisation.

> "Because of the [review] coming up, things have shifted a bit…People have started to think the unthinkable…[and] really lost faith in the Council's ability to sustain services for children and families in any meaningful, committed way" (practitioner, 2013)

> "I honestly don't know what will happen after the [review]…It could be terminal. There's a feeling this could be it. It could be 'lights out' for us and a lot of other groups. There is a lot of bitterness and worry…– it's really knocked the stuffing out of a lot of us" (practitioner, 2013)

In this context, the 'atmosphere' – and a supplementary sense that '*they* don't care' – were described as almost physical, and certainly intractable and efficacious, entities.

> "It is a really bad feeling…At [team] meetings you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. Everyone is so on edge because we all expect to be told we're losing our budget" (practitioner, 2013)

> "You can't get past the fact that they just don't care. The elected members and the ones slashing the budgets…just don't care. They don't care, and you can't get past that…There is a lack of trust that decisions will be made in the interests of local families and that lack of trust starts to affect you day-to-day" (practitioner, 2013)

In all three rounds of research, several practitioners reported that the prevailing atmosphere within their workplace had quite fundamentally and negatively affected their capacity to deliver services effectively. Many talked about increasingly feeling 'withdrawn', 'paralysed' or 'stuck' in their work as a result of anxieties about the future. For example, this 'withdrawal' was repeatedly manifest as a feeling that practitioners needed, unfortunately, to 'hold back' when relating to current and potential service-users.

> "In the current climate...It's understandable that people at ground level are basically paralysed by worrying about the future. They're just trying to cope with their everyday workload so they

are a bit withdrawn. No-one has got the time or energy to put their head above the parapet" (practitioner, 2013)

"We have almost had to change the way we present ourselves. When we're meeting people for the first time, telling them about our services, we can't promise too much. We have to be realistic and almost…hold back. We can't make too many promises because we might not be here in a year's time" (practitioner, 2013)

This dispositional shift – 'holding back' – seemed to significantly affect the way in which many practitioners worked and communicated with other groups and services in the neighbourhood, town and region. A number of practitioners described a 'mood' of increased insularity and 'Cold War'-style tensions, exacerbated by feelings of 'pain' and 'resentment' occasioned by past and future commissioning decisions within the region, and evidently magnified by the imminent budgetary review.

"Morale is very…very low. Lower than I've ever known. It is like a 'Cold War' between different services in the town…It feels like we are more inward-looking. There is less outreach and engagement, particularly at strategic level. I suppose everyone is very anxious, understandably, and keeping their head down, focusing on keeping going, a day at a time" (practitioner, 2009)

"It is very sad and troubling – There is a lot of tension and resentment among children's services [in town]. People are in pain…Everyone has become terribly overcautious…and there seems to be a very entrenched barrier developing between different groups" (practitioner, 2013)

Many service-users described, in different ways, how this atmosphere within the organisation was noted, and contributed to a 'low mood' and sense of 'distrust', among residents of the local community. As such, anticipatory anxieties were increasingly folded into practitioners' habits of encounter with service-users, reportedly constituted a particular (increasingly distanciated) social-emotional terrain of service-provision within this urban neighbourhood (cf Jupp 2013). Interviewees also catalogued a supposed range of material and emotional-affective manifestations of emerging futures: seeing evidence of the organisation's anticipated withdrawal in frowning staff, chipped paint, padlocked gates, and numerous other ostensibly-banal everyday changes.

> "There's a…low mood among staff and regulars [i.e. regular service users]. People feel let down…A bit of trust has gone because no one can tell us for certain what is going to happen to the Centre" (parent, 2009)

> "Some mornings [staff] are all frown-y. That never used to happen…They are tense because of whatever the management are thinking of doing" (parent, 2013)

> "I would say there used to be more pride in looking after the [Centre], but now it's like [staff] think 'well, there's no point fixing that because we might not be here in six months'. Like, look at the state of the [chipped paint on] door. It's things like that you notice…Or the [side] gate used to be opened every day but now it's always locked up so [families] from that side of the estate have to walk all the way around" (parent, 2013)

In this context, interviewees described a range of practices of what they termed 'emotional work' or 'looking after' one another (see Dyer et al 2008, Boyer et al 2013). These practices were evidently self-organised by configurations of practitioners, young people and parents/carers, and directed at improving organisational and community 'morale' whilst managing 'expectations' of the

organisation's future. As such, these microgeographical configurations of stakeholders were instrumental in sustaining morale, supporting service-provision, and mediating or mitigating the impacts of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity politics. Characteristically, and typically for this kind of scenario (Horton and Kraftl 2009b), interviewees were modest in articulating this work.

> "Our role [as practitioners] involves…a bit of emotional work to sort of make sure…people are realistic in their expectations about what we offer, and what might happen in the coming months, whilst also making sure we keep the show on the road and make sure our users feel supported and able to come and talk to us" (practitioner, 2009)

> "We're lucky we have a good group of us here. We all try to do our bit to look after each other…If one of the ladies [i.e. female service users] is feeling down we'll look after them, and if one of the staff is having a rough day we'll try to cheer them up, just to keep the morale up…The same happens with the youth groups" (parent, 2013)

I was also struck by how this 'looking after' entailed practices of 'coming to terms' with the anticipated withdrawal of the organisation's services. For example, some interviewees described how they had instigated discussions about 'plan b', being 'prepared for the worst': that is, how – in practical, everyday terms – service-users would be prepared to proceed in the event of the organisation's closure. It was also the case that promises – such as the promise to 'throw a huge party together on the last day' – were important in galvanising morale.

> "We do have a duty to help service users, of all ages, to prepare for the worst…So we do chat about what's going on and what might happen, just to help them come to terms…[and] help them to see that even if this place is forced to close its doors, they can have a 'plan b' ready" (practitioner, 2013)

> "We know things are not looking good, but [practitioners] have promised to help me get sorted even if I can't come here…[and] anyway, if that happens we've promised to throw a huge party together on the last day" (Male 16, 2013)

In many respects, these practices are redolent of the kinds of formal preparedness exercises discussed in literature on anticipatory political action. However, these practices seem to differ from the prescribed, pre-planned exercises which have typically been the focus of that literature, and call attention to a whole array of microgeographical – and essentially self-organised, ad hoc, improvisational – preparedness practices ongoing in/around diverse spaces of service-provision and care. By contrast, I note that many practitioners 'cringed' as they recalled formal 'visioning', 'scenario planning', 'futurology' and 'target-setting' exercises organised by the organisation's management group or Local Authority children's services leads. Here, interviewees placed a critical distance between formal, 'visionary' managerial preparedness exercises, and the self-organised, microgeographical pre-emptive practices modestly configured by groupings of practitioners, young people and parents/carers.

> "I get press-ganged into all kinds of visioning events where we're encouraged to sit around and be visionary and set targets and dream up new ways of saving money and…I just cringe. It is…nothing relevant to what we actually do on a day-to-day basis…Totally cringe-making!" (practitioner, 2009)

Intensifying anxieties for/about young people's futures

When reading interview transcripts from the three research projects, I am struck by how discussions of anticipated funding cuts were frequently discursively linked to anxieties about/for local young people. The observation that children and young people are often socially constructed as either vulnerable 'angels' or threatening 'devils' in popular/media/political discourses is by now familiar

(Valentine 1996, James and James 2005). However, it is my contention that these kinds of fears for/about young people become intensified, and more emotionally-charged, in contexts where funding cuts are anticipated as a consequence of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity politics.

Certainly, over three projects at the case study organisation, anxieties about future funding cuts were illustrated with increasingly lurid (and latterly explosive, almost apocalyptic) anticipations of young people's antisocial behaviour. A worry that some local young people would 'go boom' if not 'looked after' or 'kept in check' by adult-led services and interventions increasingly surfaced among practitioners, parents/carers and young people themselves.

> "Like a lot of people in the town, I am *seriously* worried about the impacts of cutting our youth provision. For the past four years we have kept a lid on a bubbling cauldron of angry young people and there is a real concern that when the youth group is pulled, young people are just going to go *boom*" (Practitioner, 2009)

> "If [youth activities] are finished there'll be no-one to look after local teenagers and stop them getting into trouble" (Female, 13, 2009)

> "The fear I have is that if [the case study organisation] goes, all the youth work they have put in will drop and there will be nothing to keep kids in check…The summer programme [of activities] has really kept kids out of trouble and also given them some strong preparation for school. If that all goes, I seriously fear for the area" (parent, 2013)

For example, the imminent budgetary review of services for young people was described as a particular 'flashpoint' for an already 'flammable' situation.

> "Every year we have been active in this neighbourhood, when we've done our summer programme [of activities] the level of anti-social behaviour among young people has gone down…We've taken a potentially flammable situation and damped it down…My feeling is that if we hadn't run those programmes, crime, anti-social behaviour and tensions within the community would have gone up massively...But there'll be no money to continue it. To me, that is creating a potential flashpoint. It is hugely frightening to think what might happen as a result of the next round of cuts" (practitioner, 2013)

Some interviewees argued that this intensification of anxieties about local young people's behaviour had begun to have tangible, lived, pointed outcomes for young people themselves, as manifest in reported turns toward 'punitive' community policing initiatives and 'demonising' campaigning in local elections.

> "Fears about young people have been exploited by candidates from every single party in the recent [local] elections. Let's be clear, young people have been basically demonised. If you read the election materials and local press, or if you attend any of the hustings, you'd think there were mobs of rioting kids on every street corner in [community]. It's no coincidence that the Police have started taking a much tougher, really punitive, approach to policing local streets" (practitioner, 2009)

When discussing anticipated funding cuts, other interviewees voiced a series of anxieties about, or more accurately on behalf of, young people's future wellbeing. Discussions of young people being 'cut adrift' or 'dumped on the scrapheap', in the near future, increasingly proliferated. These worries were evidently often underpinned by some specific, arguably paternalistic, presumptions about the vulnerability, needs and best interests of children, young people and families. That is, anticipated funding cuts, and the imminent budgetary review in particular, were figured as chiefly

problematic because they unsettled these interviewees' hopes that local service-provision might support the hopes, aspirations and 'life chances' of the 'most vulnerable' (who interviewees often depicted, specifically, as mothers and young people from 'troubled' family backgrounds) (see Ruddick 2007, Kraftl 2008).

> "If [services] are discontinued then kids are going to get to age 11 and find they are dumped on the scrapheap and things will go downhill from there. Really, young people are the ones who will be left with very little, but they're the ones who need it most" (practitioner, 2009)

> "A lot of [service users] haven't got any support system, and their mums haven't got the support system to provide it for them, so they really are vulnerable, some of the most vulnerable in society…If they are cut adrift with no support then things could very quickly go pear-shaped for them. God knows what effect it will have on their life chances" (practitioner, 2013)

Most frequently, however, interviewees' discussions of the 'current climate' conflated an assortment of hopes/anxieties for/about local children and young people. Practitioners, parents/carers and young people all articulated anxieties that anticipated funding cuts would have complex, compound impacts for local young people. Some anticipated that a 'whole generation' would be 'scarred' by 'knock-on effects' of funding cuts to local services. Such predictions typically combined anxieties about young people's future health, wellbeing, self-esteem, educational attainment, aspirations, economic productive, antisocial behaviour, and substance use.

> "We're dealing with a population with very complex issues and needs and the knock-on effects of cutting services and provision are likely to be profound. It's hard to predict. We're talking about a whole generation that could be lost and impossible to turn around" (practitioner, 2009)

> "I don't think [policy-makers] really comprehend how crucial this funding is in relation to dealing with lots…of different issues. It might look easy to cut on a balance sheet but when you think we're helping local young people and families with their health, education, alcohol use, debt, anti-social behaviour, housing, welfare, sexual health and *all kinds* of things you start to see how people's lives might be scarred [by funding cuts]" (practitioner, 2013)

These combinative anxieties also shared a particular sense of temporality: a sense of urgency and 'time running out' to 'do something' for this 'lost generation'. Frequently, it was felt that impacts of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity measures would be 'irreversible' if anticipated funding cuts were not reconsidered within the next few weeks or – at most – months.

> "We're at the stage where time is really running out to put things in place for summer and beyond. If things aren't resolved in the next few weeks…, if we don't do *something* in the way of guaranteeing provision over summer, the long-term impacts could be irreversible" (practitioner, 2013)

It was also the case that a range of anticipated and alternative futures were often juxtaposed in interviewees' almost-allegorical reflections and 'gallows humour' in relation to the 'current climate'. As they reflected on – for example – 'what might be', 'what might have been', 'what should have been', 'what will never be', 'what we will never know', or 'what they will learn in time', interviewees further evidenced the affecting, and efficacious, folding of possible futures into present-day spaces and situations.

> "I suppose we'll never know how things might have improved if we'd have been able to continue to develop [provision for young people]…We'll just never know what might have

been…But if they cut services at the rate they are going, just wait and see: they'll get their fingers burnt. They'll see" (practitioner, 2013)

Young people's geographies *going on* 'in the meantime'

In all three rounds of research, young people who regularly used the youth group and café responded in diverse ways to the increasingly-circulated anticipation that these spaces would be 'cut'. Their responses seemed to be essentially unpredictable: certainly, there were no easy patterns or reliable predictors in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnicity, place of residence, friendship groupings, or degree/length of engagement with the case study organisation. Some said they 'didn't care'; a few laughed and jeered at practitioners' anticipated misfortune; many felt 'anxious' and 'upset'; some were hopeful that 'things will turn out ok'; some were already actively involved (even in 2007) in campaigning for new funding and opportunities for activities within the local neighbourhood in anticipation of funding cuts.

In each research project, young people's diverse discussions of the future were often underpinned by some kind of anticipatory sense of resilience. Specifically, their comments were often characterised by a surety that they would ultimately be able to cope with change and service 'cuts', principally because of their membership of pre-existing and enduring communities. For example, interviewees variously described how the 'community spirit' of friendship groups, neighbours, or social housing blocks and terraces would go on, and provide enduring support, in spite of funding and service cuts.

"There's a big community spirit around here…Even if there's cuts and everything goes, we'll cope. We're tough. Even in tough times, my mum and [neighbour] and [friends] all rally round. It's a reciprocal thing" (Female 16, 2009)

> "Your mates and family are the ones you can trust. Cuts and that don't matter if you've got people you can trust. They're the ones who look after you" (Male 14, 2013)

This sense that groupings of local residents would obstinately 'look out for each other…like we've always done' – 'whatever happens' – permitted many interviewees to demonstrate a degree of bullishness, vitality and confidence in anticipating the future.

> "In our [housing] block we've had all sorts thrown at us. Whatever happens we're like 'whatever'. We'll look out for each other – just what we've always done. So bring it on! We're not going anywhere. We'll stick together. So yeah – bring on the future!!" (Female 17, 2009)

This evocation of communities proceeding 'like we've always done', and young people's geographies continuing 'whatever happens', recurred in many interviewees' discussions of anticipated impacts of local and national austerity measures. It was widely felt that young people's lives would simply *go on* 'in the meantime', 'whatever they throw at us'. Thus anticipated funding cuts, and impending budgetary review, were positioned as 'just the latest thing' for these young people, and their communities to 'put up with'.

> "I don't know much about cuts. I know the council are skint and they're shutting everything down but it don't mean anything to me. It's all f***ing talk. They talk about it and worry about but in the meantime, we're still here and we're always gonna be here" (Male 13, 2009)

> "These cuts are just the latest thing that people around here have to put up with. No-one cares what we think. Let's face it, there's nothing we can do to stop them…so we might as well just carry on doing our thing and looking out for each other" (Female 15, 2013)

My reflections upon these young people's anticipations of the future are ultimately ambivalent. On one hand, their senses of 'community spirit', 'toughness' and 'looking out for each other' can be read as heartening and hopeful. Their faith and participation in enduring local geographies of care, trust and reciprocity offer some hope that impacts of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity politics may, to some extent, be mitigated within this community. Indeed, some interviewees did identify 'rays of hope' despite the prevailing current climate: they pointed toward some emerging ways in which new constellations of practitioners, local adults and young people, faith organisations and voluntary groups have begun to work together in innovative ways to sustain, renew or create provision, spaces and activities for young people, despite funding cuts (cf Cloke and Beaumont 2013, Williams et al 2012 on post-secular urbanisms).

> "There are rays of hope…Our mainline funding might be withdrawn but there are signs that we'll be able to work in a new way, working more closely with the community and collaborating with new constellations of individuals and groups who do seem willing to work together to keep some provision in place…We're finding new ways of working with church- and chapel- based groups and local volunteers – both adults and young people" (practitioner, 2009)

Young people's presence and willingness to be at the heart of these new constellations, and possible futures, was widely evidenced, and explicitly linked to their pre-existing community memberships, 'care' and 'spirit' (quite contrary, then, to contemporary media and political discourses of young people as apathetic or antisocial). Young people's contributions in these contexts were reportedly characteristically significant, instrumental and pragmatic.

> "We've had to rally round. And some of our young people have become key players in rallying round. They've played a big role. They've got such spirit…We might be on the edge of despair

and insanity, but then one of the young people will think of an idea or say something or do a piece of work and it gets the momentum back. They hold things together, and…they have the in-depth knowledge of the neighbourhood. Just little things…like they all signed a 'thank you'…for our work over the last year. That makes a big difference" (practitioner, 2009)

"The kids have been great. They surprise you; they really do. They're so up for it. They care so much about their community, although you might not guess it to look at them…They're the ones who are driving us to come up with solutions. They're the ones who are coming to me with ideas for fund-raising. They're the ones who are volunteering to put in the hours to help us work through this situation" (practitioner, 2013)

On the other hand, however, some rather less affirmative politics and sensibilities sometimes simultaneously surfaced in young people's evocations of local communities 'looking out for each other'. For example, it was notable that policy-makers, community activists and practitioners (even those who lived locally and had worked closely and continuously with these young people within the organisation) were frequently labelled '*them*' or '*they*'. There was frequently a subtext that *they* were not (had never been, could never be) part of the community, and thus a sense that local residents were typically detached from, and distrustful of, local providers of services, support and care, as well as policy-makers in general.

"[Practitioners at centre] do a good job, but at the end of the day if it closes, they move on to another job. It's a shame for them, for all the work they've put in, but they'll move on. Most of them are not even from [community]. Some had never even been here until they started working at [the centre]" (Male 15, 2007)

> "It's hard to trust them. They come in for a few days and promise you the world: they're going to sort out your problems, or give some funding, or open something, or listen to your problems, or whatever it is, but nothing really changes. They don't care about us, and we don't care about them, and that's just the way it's always gonna be" (Male 16, 2013)

Anticipated funding cuts were thus often discussed in terms of a continuing, evidently hardening, dissatisfaction with local spaces of politics and service-provision and policy-makers. It was also the case that anticipations of funding cuts served as a point of articulation for generally-unspoken tensions within the case study community. For example, young people's talk in this context occasionally entailed resentment of particular othered social groups (most frequently in terms of ethnicity and social class).

> "The East Europeans and Somalis who keep coming in don't seem to have any problems getting benefits and housing…and new community centres. They just sit around getting pissed and talking in their language and contribute basically nothing, but get everything on a plate. No wonder they're gonna keep coming. And then the council turn around and say there's no money for us to keep **our** centre going" (Female 13, 2013)

> "You get the [centre-users] who are dropped off by mummy or daddy in their Mercedes. They'll be ok because they can afford to do other things or travel to other places. For them, [the centre] is just one thing on their weekly routine, but for us it's like the *only* thing" (Female 15, 2013)

It was notable that young people who did not consider themselves to be 'accepted' by 'close knit' local communities, or who were not participants in post-secular spaces of service-provision, were especially 'bleak' when anticipating life within the neighbourhood in the event of the youth

group/café being closed. Intersections between community membership, friendship groupings, and exclusions based on age, ethnicity, religion and class were explicitly cited in these discussions.

> "My family…we do not always feel so accepted in [neighbourhood]. It is a very close-knit place and coming from my community it is not so easy to make friends. [The centre] is one place where people can come together for a short while. If it closes, for me the future would feel bleak. It is the only place people can make and meet new friends" (Male 14, 2013)

Conclusions

The preceding analysis evidences how long-run processes of 'neoliberalisation', and more abruptly-felt austerity politics, are substantially affecting the lives of children, young people, families and service-providers in one particular geographic-political-economic context. In so doing I have outlined a need for more interdisciplinary research examining everyday geographies in/of spaces of public sector 'austerity', 'economic crisis' and 'neoliberalisation'. In this particular case study, anticipated futures (even futures which have still not happened – yet) emerged as constitutively significant, manifestly affecting everyday relationships and experiences, and blunting the efficacy of service-provision. I have particularly highlighted how young people are diversely engaged in, and affected by, circulations of these anticipated futures. These data should prompt consideration of how analogous and related processes are played out in different spaces, services, lifecourses and political-economic contexts, and how these processes are experienced (and perhaps resisted or coped-with) by diverse local communities. In so doing, the paper how the anticipated futures of national austerity politics and global neoliberalisms are causatively present and related-to with/in everyday geographies.

Moreover, I suggest that the day-to-day details, intensities, anticipations, anxieties and hopes which surfaced in this particular empirical case (even despite the initially instrumental, circumscribed format of the research) should challenge us to think carefully and differently about geographies of

austerity and 'neoliberalisation'. Encountering these complex, deeply-affecting geographies within just one, single-room space of service-provision prompts reflection on just how much goes unsaid within – and often remains unsayable via – many chief geographical accounts of austerity, 'neoliberalisation' and economic crisis. Geographers' state- and city- scaled analyses have been key in mapping the uneven, transformative political, economic and regional spatialities of the 'current climate'. However, as my preceding analysis suggests, this way of knowing contemporary political-economic geographies can be importantly textured, extended and complexified by local, qualitative, ethnographic, participatory and community-based modes of research. In part, this reflects the different, complementary kinds of findings which can surface through research of this kind, such as my research participants' evocations of how austerities *matter*, keenly and painfully, in everyday spaces; how vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as young people, are diversely affected by present and anticipated public funding cuts; how rationalities and atmospheres of austerity specifically affect practices of service-delivery; how diverse senses of the future can occur, and *matter*, in local communities; or how young people can actively co-constitute discourses of austerity, but can also *just go on*, in the 'current climate'. In part, too, this reflects the capacity of careful, qualitative research to challenge taken-for-granted concepts or analytic logics, as in my contention that importance of anticipated futures in my case study should challenge uncritically-linear narratives presuming that *policy decisions cause funding cuts which have impacts*.

The affecting accounts juxtaposed in this paper – of 'just waiting' for service withdrawal 'in the current climate' – constitute a challenge for further, careful, attentive geographical research, and particularly for collaborative work between different modes of geographical practice. The specific empirics relating to services for children, young people and families should challenge Children's Geographers to investigate and understand the complex geographies of austerity and 'neoliberalisation' within diverse global contexts; and, as I have suggested, there is scope for geographers working with children and young people to productively engage more with theorists of anticipation biopolitics and affect, and also vice versa. More generally, I suggest that the

challenging, affecting empirical details of this case study should prompt a greater degree of collaboration, bringing together Economic/Regional Geographers and Social/Cultural Geographers to afford new understandings of, and critical and affirmative scholarly engagements with, diverse spaces of 'the current climate' of 'neoliberalisation' and austerity politics.

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