Austerity and Altered Life-Courses Blogs

When communities catch what austerity drops

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For most of my adult life, I have worked in community development: building projects, supporting families, creating safe spaces, and trying to strengthen the social fabric in the places that need it most. I have always understood what the long shadow of austerity looked like. I saw it in the growing queues at food projects, the anxious parents asking for help with school uniforms, the families juggling multiple crisis points at once because every part of the system had shrunk around them.

But I understood austerity very differently once I became disabled myself.

Over the last few years, living with multiple long-term conditions has reshaped almost every part of my daily life; my mobility, my energy, my future plans, even my sense of identity. What surprised me most wasn't just the reality of disability, but the way public systems responded to it. The support I expected to be there was often missing, delayed, or designed to be accessed only through relentless assessment, evidence gathering, and self-justification. It felt like the burden of proof had been handed from the state to me as the individual, and the burden only grows heavier as services shrink.

For me, one of the most frustrating impacts of the current system is how long I'm left waiting for essential appointments. Even when I finally get referred to the pain clinic, the support they offer often comes in the form of courses that run for several weeks, always Monday to Friday, during normal working hours. As someone who works during the week, it puts me in an impossible position. I'm expected to attend these sessions to access further treatment, but doing so would mean taking significant time off work. It feels like the system is set up in a way that forces you to choose between your health and your livelihood, when all you want is support that actually fits around real life. Applying for disability benefits isn't just a process; it's a part-time job. Each form asks for the same information in slightly different ways. Each assessment fells like repeating the most vulnerable parts of life to a stranger who is looking for what I can *still* do, not what I had *lost*. Decisions are slow. But the effects are fast: financial uncertainty, stress, and the exhaustion of advocating for yourself while managing pain, fatigue, and medical appointments.

This experience makes something very clear, austerity doesn't just cut services it changes the entire emotional climate around disability. It places responsibility onto disabled people to constantly "prove" their need, and onto families and communities to fill the gaps when the system can't or won't.

At the same time, I am still working; my own organisation, BMCA, and partners continue to support residents through food insecurity, isolation, health challenges, and the deepening complexity that austerity brings. Many of the people who come through our doors are experiencing the same barriers I have, just in different forms. A single missed payment could throw someone into crisis. A delayed assessment could mean choosing between heating and eating. A cut to a local service could leave someone unable to leave their house, unheard, or unsafe.

There is a particular tension in supporting others through the very conditions you're struggling with yourself. On one hand, it gives you a sharp, empathetic understanding of what people are going through. On the other, it exposes how fragile the support landscape has become, and how much weight communities are carrying as statutory services retreat.

I have seen clearly how community organisations are becoming first responders in situations that should never have relied on the voluntary sector: crisis mental health support, emergency food supply, informal social care, advocacy, and safeguarding. These organisations are creative, resilient, and deeply rooted, but they are also overstretched, underfunded, and expected to catch every person falling through every gap.

Disability already reshapes life-courses, changing work, relationships, future plans, identity, and the way time and energy are spent. Austerity magnifies every one of those shifts.

Austerity limits options. It slows progress. It narrows the pathway toward stability and security. Austerity turns things that should be simple, travel, healthcare, financial support, daily living, into complicated negotiations.

For me, austerity didn't just reduce the support I could access as a disabled person; it reduced the predictability I could build my life around. It turned planning into guessing, and it placed uncertainty at the centre of decisions that already felt heavy.

And yet, austerity also illuminated the value of community. While statutory systems have become harder to navigate, local organisations, mutual aid groups, neighbours, and volunteers continue to show up in ways that policymakers cannot measure, with dignity, patience, flexibility, and care.

As both my employer and my community anchor, BMCA has stepped in time and time again where statutory services have become harder to access. While I've been stuck navigating long waiting lists or offered support that simply doesn't work around my health or my job, BMCA has been the place that quietly fills the gaps: checking in, offering practical help, adapting support around real life, not the other way round. My colleagues show up with dignity, patience, flexibility and compassion, the kind of support you will never find written in to strategic plans, but that makes daily life manageable in ways the formal system no longer can.

Living with disability while working in community development means holding two realities at once:

- I understand what it feels like to be a service user navigating shrinking systems.
- I understand what it feels like to be a community worker trying to support others through the same landscape of scarcity.

Both roles require resilience. Both expose the consequences of political decisions on real lives. Both show that disabled people are often expected to carry the weight of austerity twice: first personally, and then within their families and communities.

I wanted to contribute to this blog series because our stories matter, not just as data points, but as lived realities shaped by policy choices. Disability and austerity are often discussed separately, but for many of us, they are deeply intertwined. Understanding this connection is essential if we want a future where disabled people can live not just with survival, but with dignity, autonomy, and hope.

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