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Row over housing scheme in Brighton exposes Labour divisions

By Lucy Fisher

Bitter divisions in Labour over public-private partnerships have spread to Brighton, causing fears that members on the left will seek to deselect centrist party councillors.

Left-wing Labour figures in the city are furious at council plans to build 1,000 homes in partnership with a private enterprise.

Among the protesters is Kevin Allen, a left-wing local councillor and Momentum member, who said he had worries about the proposals and whether Hyde Housing, which was founded as a housing association, had "lost some of its social purpose".

Mr Allen has also raised concerns over plans to put Brighton's famous pavilion and museums in a trust. He conceded that it could allow "greater flexibility of fundraising", but added that the assets had "been in local government ownership for 170 years and that shouldn't be discarded lightly". He has called for more scrutiny.

The objections of Momentum-supporters and other left-wing activists have raised fears that councillors who back the scheme could be targeted for deselection.

It follows a similar clash in the London borough of Haringey over proposals for a controversial development vehicle. A series of centrist Labour councillors have allegedly been deselected or forced to step down during the row and there have been accusations of bullying, sexism and antisemitism by Momentum activists. Senior centrist Labour figures have raised concerns that left-wing activists are "gearing up for Haringey part II" in Brighton.

Staff at the pavilion and museums have threatened to strike over the proposals to move them into a trust and a local trade union leader, Mark Turner, of the GMB, has called for Warren Morgan, the Labour council leader, to consider his position.

Peter Kyle, the MP for Hove, has rowed in behind Mr Morgan, however, and backed the council over the housing scheme. Mr Kyle, 47, argued it would deliver more new homes than have been built in the area for a generation. He added that half the homes built would be based on rents linked to the national living wage and half will be shared-ownership.

Earlier this month Jeremy Corbyn called for the rebirth of "municipal socialism" and signalled his opposition to private sector involvement in the provision of public services and management of public assets. He also pledged to take measures to bring private finance initiatives back in house.

Centrist Labour town hall figures have countered that they must be pragmatic in the face of cuts handed down from central government and insist they should work with the private sector on projects that benefit residents.

Some centrists in the party believe that a Momentum meeting in Brighton later this month, to which Chris Williamson, the MP for Derby North and a key Corbyn ally, has been invited to speak, will be the start of a local deselection campaign.

The event is billed as an opportunity to "inspire as many socialists as possible to put themselves forward - before April 3 - for selection as Labour council candidates in our city, to help us achieve the first socialist majority in the history of Brighton & Hove city council".

Mr Allen said that the influx of party members on the left meant it was likely that new people would want to stand for elected positions. He said that there was no co-ordinated deselection campaign, however. Momentum has also said that it is not campaigning for deselections.

Mr Morgan has come under pressure from the left locally for recently signing a public letter, along with about 70 other Labour council leaders, criticising the actions of the party's influential governing body, the national executive committee.