

The cruellest cut of all? Proposed Changes to Disability Living Allowance.

How would you feel if the Government took away 69% of your income?

For some of our most disadvantaged citizens this is exactly what will happen if plans announced in the recent Comprehensive Spending Review to take away Disability Living Allowance (DLA) from people in registered care homes go ahead in 2012-13.

People in registered care homes (who do not self-fund) usually get a small personal allowance of £22.30 per week to live on. It is money they can spend, for example on toiletries, clothing, or a trip to the pub or cinema etc. The rest of their income is usually taken into account in the means testing process to pay the home's fees. Residential care fees cover all accommodation costs and utility costs, food, social activities and care costs.

The only exception to this rule is the mobility component of DLA. Including the personal allowance, this gives a total maximum income to people in registered care of only £72.15 per week. The current proposal to remove DLA from this group therefore means a potential 69% loss of disposable income.

DLA is a benefit for people who are disabled, have personal care needs, mobility needs or both and who claim before their 65th birthday. There are around 3 million people claiming DLA who can use the money to offset some of the impairment-related additional costs.

DLA is a complicated benefit with two components: a care component and a mobility component. The mobility component is paid to people under 65 who have problems getting around outdoors independently. It is paid at two rates.

The lower rate (£18.95 per week) is for people who can physically walk, but who need guidance or supervision out of doors in unfamiliar places.

The higher rate (£49.85 per week) is currently paid to disabled people who meet specific criteria including people who are unable

or virtually unable to walk due to physical impairment, or people who are both deaf and blind.

The government also plans to scrap the self-assessment claim process and replace it with a new medical assessment. All disabled people of working age will have to go through this medical from 2013. The target is to reduce spending on DLA by 20%, effectively meaning that one in five disabled people could lose their DLA if these levels of savings are to be achieved.

In justifying the proposed changes to the DLA Mobility component Danny Alexander, Treasury Chief Secretary, said that they were bringing the law into line with people in hospital. However, there are important differences between the two groups. People in hospital are in need of acute hospital care because they are ill. People in registered care are usually there because they need help with day to day living tasks, like dressing, washing, eating etc - they are not necessarily ill.

This change seems to be based on an outdated view of disabled people that just because somebody is living in a care home, they no longer need to go anywhere, they have no need to visit the shops, attend appointments or visit family and friends or even to go out for a meal and a few drinks with a partner or potential partner. This is a return to the view expressed by Miller and Gwynne in their research during the 1970's that residential care is for people who are 'socially dead' (Miller, E.J. and Gwynne, G.V. 1972 *A Life Apart*. London, Tavistock Publications).

The removal of DLA will impact on disabled people across the UK as a recent article in the Disability News Service has highlighted. Alan Doyle, who is tetraplegic, lives in a care home in the West Midlands where the nearest bus service is two miles away, and uses his DLA to pay for adapted taxis to visit his wife at their home, and to go shopping. Apart from his DLA, he only receives a £20 a week "pocket money allowance", so the DLA cut would not only prevent him visiting his wife, he would be barred from enjoying leisure trips, meeting friends and socialising in the local community.

Alan went on to say that "In other words, we will be confined to the four walls of the care home with £20 'pocket money' to cover clothing, toiletries, the cost of a telephone and in my case a

broadband connection.... It's clear that the coalition definition of 'fairness' and 'dignity' and being part of 'The Big Society' regardless of your political belief is not extended to disabled members of our 'civilised society'."

Some disabled people in care have used their DLA to buy powered wheelchairs, to lease a car or wheelchair accessible vehicle for social and recreational use, or sometimes to travel to work. Removing this benefit could therefore mean confining people, not just to their rooms, but effectively making ostracised prisoners who have no independent freedom of movement outwith their institution.

In Parliament, Baroness Campbell of Surbiton has also recently highlighted the impact on two people "Since the Comprehensive Spending Review announcement on this DLA saving, disability organisations have been receiving alarmed calls from people desperate at the prospect of losing this entitlement to hard-won independence. Last week RADAR heard from Patricia King. Her son and daughter-in-law are both disabled and live in residential care. Without the mobility component, they will no longer be able to visit the doctor, dentist, bank, church, library or shops, let alone relatives and friends. The proposed changes will remove over 45% of her son's total allowances and over 69% of her daughter-in-law's."

Living in a care home as an adult requires a good relationship with staff who can be required to do a host of really intimate tasks. Organisations like Margaret Blackwood Housing Association (MBHA) have worked very hard to provide the highest quality of care in our Supported Accommodation units, and ensure that our residents have a good quality of life. However, most people would agree that the ability to have some time to yourself and to get out of the four walls you live in is important. A lack of accessible housing and funding for support packages can leave people with no choice but to move into institutional care. Under these circumstances to remove a lifeline benefit which offers people some degree of freedom and autonomy is arguably not the action of a caring society.

The Government have said that the cuts will affect us all, but politicians are only being asked to accept a 5% pay cut. Would

they accept a 45% or 69% cut to their salary and the associated negative change to their freedoms and quality of life?

It is estimated that some 58,000 disabled people will be affected by this change, 62 of whom are currently MBHA residents. The proposed savings of £135 million out of a £186 billion Social Security Budget are tiny and will do little to solve the problems of our national debt. The impact on the lives of some of our most disadvantaged and marginalised citizens however, could be enormous.

Grant Carson Grant@gcil.org.uk

Director, Employment and Housing Services
Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living.
Chairperson, Margaret Blackwood Housing Association.

(This article is not intended as a definitive statement of law, people who self-fund their care may not be affected by the proposed change.)