

NORFOLK

Unhappy Christmas card message from campaigners

Campaigners fighting to prevent disabled people from bearing the brunt of government cuts have sent a 'special' protest Christmas card to Norfolk MPs and county councillors.

The Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People (NCOCP) has sent the Christmas card to all of Norfolk's councillors and MPs pointing out the uncertainty over whether key services will survive means Norfolk's 180,000 disabled people are facing worrying Christmas and a new year tinged with fear.

The card registers the "devastating effects" the NCOCP says the coalition government's policies and Norfolk County Council's cuts to bridge a £155m spending gap in the next three years will have on vulnerable people, whose independence could be threatened.

Mark Harrison, NCOCP chief executive, said: "These cuts are neither fair nor necessary. Disabled people are experiencing a double whammy as they are being targeted in a disproportionate and discriminatory way by both central and local government."

The Christmas card highlights a recent report from the Office of National Statistics which found many disabled people are socially isolated, cash-strapped and struggling to take part in normal activities.

By DAN GRIMMER

Mr Harrison said disabled people and their families are poorer than their peers and have less access to education, training and jobs because of discrimination and barriers in society.

He said many are more reliant on benefits and services than other sections of the population – which means they will be particularly hard hit by the cuts.

Mr Harrison said: "If the main focus of cuts is these very benefits and services then it is inevitable that they are completely unfair."

"I think that if the Norfolk MPs and county councillors are serious when they say they have the best interests of Norfolk citizens at heart, then they would tell the coalition government that it is not possible to implement these changes to benefits and over £155m cuts without causing poverty and misery to the most vulnerable people in the community – and refuse to do it."

David Harwood, cabinet member for adult and community services at Norfolk County Council, said: "I understand these concerns, these are very challenging times. The sheer size and scale of the savings we must make to balance our books is



PROTEST: Mark Harrison with the card sent to MPs on behalf of the Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People..

unprecedented.

"That means that we, like all other social care authorities are faced with some really hard choices and as we have said, we can only make them through radical change in both what we do and the way we do things in the future.

"The fact is that we are facing a

28pc cut in the amount of grant we get from government over the coming few years and at the same time demand for social care continues to rise year on year.

"We are listening and won't decide until we have heard what people say and considered all views in the round."

Earlier this month the county council's Big Conversation was branded a "Big Con" by the NCOCP.

They said they had not been given enough meaningful information about the plans, which include proposals to shut down council-run sensory support services for the deaf and the blind.

NORFOLK

Concerns at future of elderly care

By SHAUN LOWTHORPE

Public affairs correspondent

Social care chiefs are hoping to work more closely with GPs and health officials to help plan the care of Norfolk's rising elderly population – but there are no signs yet if the NHS will step in to bridge any shortfall in council funding in the wake of swingeing cuts.

Norfolk County Council is looking at a raft of cuts to bridge a predicted £155m funding shortfall in the coming three years, including £18m in preventative services aimed at helping to keep older people living in their homes longer.

And with the government looking at overhauling primary care by creating new GP-led groups to commission services, the council is hoping to work closely with them and district councils over the provision of services.

Critics believe the cuts, combined with withdrawing funding for groups such as day centres, and plans to change the eligibility criteria at which older people can access services to make them freely available only for those classed to have a critical need, could be hugely damaging for older people.

Yesterday members of the council's scrutiny committee heard how Norfolk is facing "significant" financial pressures because of the greater number of older people requiring services.

Lib Dem councillor Diana Clarke, who is also chairman of a local care charity said she was very worried about the impact of the care cuts. "I am really worried in terms of the current proposals on the cuts in preventative services," she said.

"How do we square up the reduction in early intervention with what we are saying is a big problem we have got to address?"

Harold Bodmer, director of adult

STEPPING UP THE ATTACK

Controversial council plans to cut services for some of Norfolk's most vulnerable people have come under fresh attack from the woman who helped found a key support group for families coping with autism.

Norfolk County Council is proposing major changes to the way services for people with learning difficulties are delivered as well as a shake-up of day services across the board. The changes are linked to the council's Big Conversation process, which sets out how the authority intends to scale back from the direct provision of services as it moves to bridge a £155m funding gap. But campaigners fighting the proposals are stepping up the attack against the plans amid fears that the measures will hit some of the most vulnerable in the community.

Sandra Sheldon, one of the founders of the Norfolk Autistic Society, said that years of good work could be undone, and vulnerable people and carers left to fend for themselves. Mrs Sheldon, from Unthank Road Norwich, whose family will be directly affected by the cuts, is doubly concerned after cuts by the coalition government have seen the removal of help to re-house her 48-year-old daughter Sarah, who has learning difficulties and autism.

The 71-year-old also fears that council plans to withdraw from the running of day centres could leave

and community services said the council planned to make the best use of the funding it has got.

"The only assurance we can give to that is to make sure the funding we have got for prevention is used to the absolutely best effect and by joining up our work around primary care, working with the primary care community around localities," he said.

County Hall currently spends around £40m on preventative services,



Picture: ADRIAN JUDD

UNCERTAIN FUTURE: Sandra Sheldon and her daughter Emily. Sandra is worried about cuts in services for her daughter Sarah.

her daughter, who attends the Dereham Day Centre, without any support, and she was critical about the lack of detailed information provided about the plans.

"We are very worried about the future," Mrs Sheldon said. "We've been trying for four to five years to move Sarah on to other accommodation. We have looked after her since birth, but my husband and I are both in our 70s and we are worried about what will happen to her. There will come a time when we

and committee chairman Paul Morse asked how much discussion the authority had with other partners such as housing and health.

"We have been talking about the importance of tapping into other networks, yet surely there is a danger that we get our financial plans made in silos and we can finish up with those local networks breaking down," Mr Morse said.

James Bullion, assistant director of

can't cope any more and we don't want a crisis situation to develop." Criticism of the Big Conversation is mounting as the full impact of the cuts starts to be realised. County Hall wants to overhaul services for people with learning difficulties and create new community hubs, with specialist support workers on hand to give advice and support to people and help them plan how to use their personal budgets to arrange for activities.

Mrs Sheldon, who with her husband

adult and community services, said that some formal arrangements did already exist with NHS Norfolk and with other councils including the Supporting People programme, which is linked to housing.

"We are certainly working to refresh our approach to working in localities based around GP consortia as well as local strategic partnerships," Mr Bullion said.

"There are three joint posts with

Michael, helped found the Norfolk Autistic Society in 1970, said the day services options being proposed by the council were "pie in the sky", and likely to be more expensive.

"We don't know whether other providers are going to come in. In the new set-up for day services, people will choose what to do and have their own activities and personal budgets. But Sarah doesn't communicate, she can't make friends, and she can't make conversation, she can't say she is hungry, or hot or cold, we have to remind her.

"All these cuts are aimed at people with learning difficulties, the deaf and the blind," she added.

David Harwood, cabinet member for Adult and Community Services at Norfolk County Council, said personal budgets were designed to open up opportunities for vulnerable people, giving them real choice and control over how their social care needs are met and access to support tailored to their individual needs and wishes. "The level of control people wish to have over their care can be adjusted so that they – or their family carer – are not overwhelmed by the changes."

He said he wanted to reassure the Sheldons, and others, that if this proposal was agreed when the final decisions are made in February, the council would work closely with everyone affected.

NHS Norfolk. Our desire is to commission those services with new GP consortia when they are up and running."

After the meeting Mr Bodmer said that while talks were ongoing with NHS Norfolk, it was too early to go into funding details and the authority was also waiting for a formal response from NHS Norfolk to the Big Conversation proposals.

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