

Care for the elderly in UK faces collapse

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According to Age UK (formerly Help the Aged and Age Concern), local authorities cut care for older people by 4.5 percent in 2011. This comes at a time when social care as a whole is chronically underfunded.

The cutbacks have led to increased costs having to be met by elderly people. Data collated from 93 out of 153 councils in England showed that there has been a 13 percent rise in the cost of the Meals on Wheels service and a 33 percent increase in the cost of transport for elderly people needing to get to places such as day-care centres. Some 15 percent of elderly people no longer have access to free services at all and seven out of ten councils will only provide services for those assessed as being in substantial or critical need—with free assistance now being means tested.

A study carried out in October 2010 by the National Association of Care Catering found that many elderly Britons were at risk of malnutrition because they were not identified early enough. This was due to lack of interaction with meal service providers, who because of tight budget restraints are forced to have minimal contact with the elderly population.

Michelle Mitchell, director of Age UK, told the *Guardian* last week that increasing numbers of older people who have considerable care needs were “getting absolutely no support at all, or poor quality and limited support,” as a result of cuts to local authority provision.

Mitchell cited cases where older people who were unable to undress themselves were being put to bed at 5 p.m., as it was the only time care workers were able to fit them in. They would then be left until 10 a.m. the next day.

Research published by the Kings Fund has revealed a complete lack of social care for the elderly in the UK, due to large-scale cuts. The number of older people requiring care but receiving nothing will reach almost 900,000 in 2012, rising to 1 million by 2015.

Around half a million elderly and vulnerable people

have to meet soaring costs to pay for basic care and support in their own homes. In some areas this figure is as high as £10,000 a year, with councils increasing charges for bathing, cleaning and help with shopping. Four out of ten councils have abolished their caps on charges while a further four in ten have increased their limits, leaving those who need the services having to pick up the bill.

Information obtained under Freedom of Information law showed that the average elderly and disabled person was now paying on average £13.49 per hour for home care, a rise of 6 percent in two years. For someone not receiving state benefits this would mean having to pay around £7,015 a year for an average of 10 hours care per week.

A report from the Department of Health shows that the number of older people given help to live independently in their own homes has fallen by 120,000 in the last year. Some were told that they no longer qualified for care, with others told that their social workers no longer provided the service.

The impact of a lack of care for elderly people is already being felt, with increased numbers presenting at casualty for treatment as their health fails. Department of Health figures show that the number of elderly people admitted to accident and emergency (A&E) departments stands at 1.2 million a year.

The number of those over the age of 80 that were taken to accident and emergency departments has increased by 37 percent in two years, from 913,785 in 2007/2008 to 1,247,672 million in 2009/2010. This is placing further strain on underfunded and understaffed hospital services. A poll of general practitioners (GPs) and hospital doctors found that four out of five doctors said they had seen patient care suffer as a result of health service cuts during 2011.

Ruthe Isden of Age UK said, “People find themselves unable to access the help they need from GPs or

community services at night or the weekend. As a result they turn to A&E due to a lack of an alternative.”

The assault on care services to some of the most needy and vulnerable in society comes at a time when many older people eke out an existence in poverty, facing rising prices in fuel and food. Age UK estimate that there are 1.8 million pensioners living below the poverty line, with 1 million living in severe poverty.

It is estimated that for the winter period of 2010/2011 there were an additional 22,000 deaths of those above the age of 65 in England and Wales attributed to the cold. This is often the result of elderly people not being able to afford to heat their homes adequately.

In response to the criticisms by organisations such as Age UK, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government announced a paltry extra £150 million for elderly patients to get care at home. Health Secretary Andrew Lansley also announced that an even smaller sum, £20 million, will be directed to the disabled facilities grant to help people live independently at home.

This must be measured against the £1.3 billion cut in local authorities’ annual budgets for help for the over-65s, imposed by central government, as part of more than £100 billion in spending cuts nationally. Figures released by the government two months ago revealed that in 2010-2011 councils in England spent £6.3 billion on social care for the over-65s compared to £7.6 billion in 2009-2010—a cut of nearly a fifth (17 percent).



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