

Disabled suffer as a result of drive for UK benefits cuts

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Six charities have told the *Guardian* that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's focus on "benefit over-claiming" and alleged fraud has fuelled abuse and scepticism against disabled people.

Scope, Leonard Cheshire Disability, the National Autistic Society, Royal National Institute for the Blind and Mencap have cited inflammatory media reports as playing a part, but laid the blame squarely on ministers and civil servants for repeatedly highlighting supposed mass abuse of the welfare system.

The *Daily Mail* leads the newsprint onslaught, while daily television programmes drip feed a "fairness for taxpayers" culture that isolates disabled people as non-contributors to society, the report states.

Some of the charities have been contacted by people with very real concerns for their safety in the climate of suspicion over their eligibility for benefits. People with "invisible" disabilities feel most under pressure, with their entitlement to use disabled facilities called into question by people who feel empowered by the media rhetoric.

Tom Madders, head of campaigns at the National Autistic Society, said, "The Department of Work and Pensions is certainly guilty of helping to drive this media narrative around benefits, portraying those who receive benefits as workshy scroungers or abusing a system that's really easy to cheat."

The head of policy for Disability Alliance, Neil Coyle, says his organisation was being told of increasing levels of verbal abuse and was worried that this could escalate into attacks. "There's a lot of concern that the level of abuse and harassment goes unrecorded because it's seen as almost the norm. It seems to be growing as a result of a misperception of a much wider abuse of benefits than actually exists. That's being fed by the DWP [Department of Work

and Pensions] in their attempts to justify massive reductions in welfare expenditure."

Inflammatory remarks by Maria Miller, the minister for disabled people in the DWP, bear this out. Speaking on the Disabled Living Allowance (DLA, a non-means-tested benefit aimed to help with the extra expenditure of disability), she claimed, "we now have a situation where there are hundreds of millions of pounds of overpayments and the vast majority of people get the benefit for life without systematic checks to see if their condition has changed."

In fact, the only change most claimants experience in their condition is that it worsens. DLA is not paid for temporary illnesses, and the different bandings mean that, as illnesses progress, another claim has to be filed in the form of a multi-question booklet some 60 pages long.

Figures prove that the fraud rate for DLA stands at 0.5 percent, while the official error rate for incorrect payments by the department stands at 0.8 percent. Miller has claimed overpayments of £600 million each year, but more than this is underpaid due to those not receiving what they are entitled to.

DLA is one of the first benefits targeted by the government as part of its cuts in welfare. It is due to be replaced by Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in April 2013 and aims to cut 20 percent of claims by 2015. PIP will be awarded by a points system very similar to the Employment and Support Allowance, which is policed by the notorious Atos Origin company, whose aim is to refuse benefits to as many sick claimants as possible through its tick box system and forcing them into work for which they are not fit.

The government awarded the firm a lucrative £100 million annual contract to implement this. Many thousands who are refused go on to appeal. Of these, 40

percent regain the benefit. Numbers banded about also include cutting 500,000 Motability car entitlements, placing at risk the whole Motability scheme that has been so beneficial to the disabled—ensuring in many instances that they can continue working as they cannot access public transport.

Atos is sponsoring the 2012 Paralympic games in London, prompting disabled activists to call for a boycott. Their resolve was strengthened when the former chairman of Atos, Bernard Bourigeaud, was co-opted onto the governing body. Atos is the IT partner of the games and is building the web site.

John McArdle, co-founder of Black Triangle, a disabled activists organisation, said, “It is quite frankly obscene that they are the sponsors of the Paralympics. The government is using them and the Paralympics to make propaganda for their ill-conceived welfare cuts programme.”

This onslaught on the most vulnerable in society has seen the government force councils to cut their spending on social care because of budget restrictions. There are four bandings to judge which category of care a person requires. Already, most councils adhere to only providing help for the top two bands—those requiring substantial or critical support.

A survey commissioned by a committee of MPs has revealed that nearly two thirds of local authorities in England have reduced their spending on support in the community for disabled and older people. The Commons Health Select Committee carried out the survey, as part of its review of public spending in health and social care and found budgets for community support fell by nearly 10 percent this year, compared with 2010-2011.

Despite “government assurances”, local authorities are “having to raise eligibility criteria in order to maintain social care services to those in greatest need”, it states.

“The overall picture of social care is of a service that is continuing to function by restricting eligibility, by making greater savings on other local authority functions and by forcing down the price it pays to contractors for services.”

It concludes that total spending on social care fell by at least 1.5 percent in 2011-2012, although a survey by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services suggested spending on adult social care had fallen by as

much as 6.8 percent.

Conservative health secretary Andrew Lansley responded to the report by saying councils received enough government funding to “maintain the current levels of access and eligibility”, but “need to work smarter with their health professional colleagues to bring integrated services closer to people’s homes in the community.”

He added, “They need to look at how investing in innovative technology and ways of working, like telehealth and reablement, can give patients better results closer to home and free up more money for frontline services.”

By this he means remotely monitored health care systems, tagging Alzheimer’s patients to alert an alarm when they try to leave their homes unaccompanied, and short-term help in their own home by care workers, especially after a hospital stay.

Many councils are meeting across the country to implement increased costs to elderly and disabled people for their services. They will include lowering of the amount of savings a person has before being made to contribute to one’s care bill. Some day-care centre charges are increasing by 500 percent to £25 a day, and home care hourly rates are also increasing, forcing many elderly and disabled people to reconsider the amount of care they receive and leaving them more vulnerable and isolated.



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