Voices for Change and the We Step Together Group

Impacts of the British Government's Welfare Reform Bill on Disabled People in North West Glasgow

As a Community Development Worker employed by Glasgow City Council Social Work Department I have recently (over the past 6 months) been undertaking several pieces of work with Disabled service users in North West Glasgow who are members of North West Glasgow Voices for Change and the We Step Together Group (WEST).

These pieces of work have been about how changes to the payment and provision of welfare benefits will affect disabled people. The Voices for Change members have raised particular concerns in relation to the current government policy, which involves everyone who is on incapacity benefit having to attend a medical, which is conducted by a private company (ATOS) on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This is as a direct result of the creation of the new benefit Employment Support Allowance (ESA)

A number of service users have commented to me that they have found having to attend these medicals to be immensely stressful. The anxiety caused has meant that people have in some circumstances been unable to sleep, have suffered panic attacks, and a variety of other symptoms. Of particular concern is the way in which the medicals are conducted some points in relation to this are as follows:

- The people undertaking the assessments are often not qualified doctors.
- The people undertaking the assessments are often deciding people are now fit for work on very limited evidence (Ten-minute interviews) and are ignoring the advice and diagnosis of a general practitioner who has declared the same person unfit to undertake paid employment.
- The way, in which the questions are asked with sometimes, the same question being repeated repeatedly has proved very stressful particularly for adults with learning disabilities. Information I have received shows that conditions such as epilepsy and depression are being accentuated by having to go through this process.

Some other wider points about the process are as follows:

- A number of adults with disabilities I have spoken to only have a limited or minimal understanding of what is happening when they are sent for these medicals. It is good that people can take an advocate with them to such meetings and medicals, but more time needs to be taken to explain what is being discussed.
- The experience of failing medicals and then having benefits stopped or reduced therefore has a devastating impact for the individuals I spoke with all of whom have a disability.
• The loss of income means that people are not able to participate fully in life because they no longer have enough money to do so. One example is of a member of the WEST group who was only able to go on a group holiday because he received support from other group members and his family.

• Another example was a Voices for Change member who had to go without food and only had two meals a day for a period due to cuts in their benefits.

The vast majority of service users who I have spoken to and were deemed fit to work by ATOS, were able to successfully appeal the decision and eventually had their full level of benefit restored. Nevertheless having to go through this very stressful process where it can take people months to win an appeal and they have to suffer a damaging loss of income causes people untold health and personal problems as highlighted.

I hope this information is useful.

Regards
Chris Furse
Community Development Officer
For and on behalf of Voices for Change and the We Step Together Group