

Disabled people could be forced into homes

Council to introduce £35k cap on care, campaigners call it a dangerous move

DISABLED people in West Berkshire will be moved out of their homes and placed into care if the cost of looking after them is deemed too expensive.

A cost cap has been introduced, meaning those who require home-care exceeding £35,000 per year will be placed in a specialist unit, and disability benefits have also been slashed as part of two proposals green lit to save money by West Berkshire Council. The council believes the cap will affect 26 people and save a "cautious" £25,000.

The move has enraged disability campaigners, who claim that the changes, voted through at an extraordinary meeting of the council's executive on Thursday, will "set back care standards 30 years".

The chairman of the West Berkshire Disability Alliance, Mick Hutchins, said that information later presented as part of the proposals had not been made explicit during the consultation, including the extent to which disability expenditure was to be slashed.

However, during the meeting the head of adult social services, Jan Evans, said that the consultation had been thorough.

The council said that alterations to how disability-related expenditure was calculated would save £700,000. Mr Hutchins questioned that figure, saying that his calculations showed a saving of £872,820 a year.

Council spokesman Keith Ulyatt said that Mr Hutchins' calculations would be correct if the client group remained static for a full year, but that it was constantly changing.

He said: "Our client group changes on a daily basis, as clients either have short packages of care, needs increase or decrease, go into residential/nursing care

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or pass away.

"Following the implementation of the new policy, the current projected increase in income based on our current client group is approximately £700,000. As the client group varies through the year, so does the income received, so we will not know the actual total income collected through 2012-13 until after 31 March 2013."

The portfolio holder for community care, Joe Mooney (Con, Birch Copse) said that the changes were aimed at resolving an issue in the district where many elderly and vulnerable people were asset rich but cash poor, living in large houses and requiring extensive costly care but having no money to pay and thus requiring hand-outs.

The leader of the council, Graham Jones (Con, Lambourn), said that the

council had again put more money into community care than ever before.

Speaking after the meeting, Mr Hutchins said that a dangerous step had been taken with the introduction of a cap.

"Once they do that, it makes it easier for them to pull figures together if they want to make savings in future," he said. "What is to stop them saying it should be £30,000 next year and keep driving it down?"

"This goes against everything we have been fighting for over the past 30 years, people being taken out of their homes. And there is no guarantee they will be placed in a home in Newbury, it could be Swindon, Reading, anywhere they have space. It will drive standards down. I think it's a scandalous decision and we are asking them to re-think."

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Council accused of denying public chance to question plan

THE introduction of a cost-cap for the home care of disabled residents and a slew of changes to disability handouts were due to be debated at a meeting of West Berkshire Council's executive on March 29, before being pulled at the last minute.

Instead, the items were the sole points of an extraordinary meeting held two weeks later in the council chamber.

Members of the public were scant on the ground as the meeting was held during working hours, and Liberal Democrat councillors accused the ruling Conservative party of denying the

public their democratic right by moving the contentious items to a less conspicuous time in order to push them through.

Liberal Democrat councillor Julian Swift-Hook (Greenham) called on the portfolio holder for community care, Joe Mooney (Con, Birch Copse) to apologise for the "fiasco".

Mr Mooney accused Mr Swift-Hook of gesture politics and said that no apology was necessary during the bad-tempered affair, which saw both items voted through by the Conservatives after a short bout of questioning.