

The effect of austerity on people with autism

Support for autism in a time of austerity

Since the start of the economic crisis in Europe, we have been seeing funding cuts to disability benefits and other forms of support for people with disabilities in many European countries.

As Evelyne Friedel, Vice-President of Autism-Europe points out, *"Providing support to people with disabilities is a human right – the governments of Europe have confirmed that when they signed the Convention [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, December 2010].*

It's not acceptable to put the rights of people with disabilities aside when financial difficulties arise [...] Governments and the European Union institutions must ensure that their commitments under the UNCRPD are fulfilled and that persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders benefit from the same opportunities as the rest of Europe's citizens¹.



Autism and Disability Benefits

For people with autism the results of reduced support present a unique set of challenges. Historically, persons with autism have been poorly served and poorly supported by both the social care and welfare systems. As a result, outcomes are often poor. If we take the example of a study run in England by the National Autism Society, the emerging message from adults with autism indicates that:

- 61% of adults with autism rely on their families for financial support; over 40% live at home with their parents;
- 63% of adults with autism do not have the support to meet their needs. A third have experienced severe mental health problems because of a lack of support;
- only 15% are in full-time employment;
- one-third of adults with autism are currently without a job or benefits².

A parent of an adult with Asperger syndrome told the British National Autistic Society, "Without DLA (Disability living Allowance) I can say with absolute assurance my daughter would have to give up her entire independence. This would lead to a return of the depression and suicidal ideation and I do not think she would be able to cope. I live in fear of this happening to her"³.

Disability Living Allowance is a key benefit for many adults and children with autism, designed to meet the additional costs of their disability. Autistic people are reliant on their DLA for independent travel, for accessing community services and for getting the support they need to manage their day-to-day lives. Without their DLA, many people would be socially isolated and far more likely to experience poor mental health⁴.

¹ Autism-Europe. Short-term savings equals long-term problems for people with autism".

² National Autistic Society. Who benefits? The impact of DLA reform on people with autism spectrum disorders. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/assistant/Downloads/The-National-Autistic-Society-DLA-briefing-to-give-to-MPs.pdf>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

The situation in different EU Member States

Below we present some examples of how austerity in the context of Europe's economic crisis is having an impact on the support given to persons with disabilities. These accounts relate to all disabilities for which state support can be received, and not just autism spectrum disorders. However, in light of the information given above on the particular impact DLA and other state benefits have on the autonomy and quality of life of persons with autism, the information below should underline the risks that such cuts will present to the autistic community. This list of examples is by no means exhaustive, and simply gives an indication of a general trend we are witnessing throughout the continent.



UK

According to the national budget presented by the British government in 2015, sick and disabled people on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) who are likely to be able to return to work will see their payments reduced by about £30 a week to the level of Jobseeker's Allowance, currently £73.10 a week for those aged 25 and over. The change will affect new claimants from 2017 but not existing ones⁵.

Mark Lever, chief executive of the National Autistic Society, said: "The Government has broken its promise to protect disability benefits. Most autistic people on out-of-work benefits want to work, but struggle due to employers' misunderstandings and a lack of support. They need ESA to pay for basics like food, heating and clothing."

Just 15% of people on the autism spectrum are in full-time paid employment and more than two thirds rely on their families for financial support. Many parents tell us that they have to give up work to help support their autistic son or daughter. Disability benefits - in the form of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) - are a lifeline for these families.

The National Autistic Society is also arguing for housing benefits for young disabled people to be protected, following rumours that under 25s will no longer be eligible. We know that many young people on the autism spectrum or with other disabilities are reliant on housing benefits, which enable them to leave home, to live in supported accommodation and to gain their independence.

Mr Lever added that "People tell us they use their benefits to pay for food, clothes and support to help them wash, cook or to travel safely. So losing any of this money could be devastating"⁶.



Italy

Between 2012 and 2013, Italy oversaw a 10 billion euro cut in funding cut for regional and local health and social services.

The cuts dealt a heavy blow to the social care system. For example, in the region of Piedmont, after a lot of hard work by various disabled people's organisations (DPOs) by 2004 the barrier that had traditionally stopped disabled people from accessing disability allowance had been broken down and the introduction of a regional decree with a fund of 1 million Euros for 50 disabled people with high levels of support need had been secured. By 2011 there were 178 disabled people with personal budgets totalling 2.7 million Euros, protected by special resolution and under the constant

⁵ *The Independent*: Budget 2015: Tax credits and housing benefit to be cut for families with more than two children. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/budget-2015-live-emergency-uk-benefits-to-be-cut-for-families-with-more-than-two-children-10376015.html>

⁶ Ibid

monitoring of DPOs. This was seen as “good practice” to be shared with other regions. Despite the fact that all those budgets that were funded in 2011 and 2012 should have been safe, a decision was suddenly made without consultation to cut 30% from each individual’s disability allowances. The situation has yet to improve since⁷.



In crisis-hit Greece, in 2011 it was announced that there would be a 40% cut to the state’s financial contribution to non-government organisations and charities that provide essential services to people with Autism, including supported living centres⁸.

Further cuts came after bailout negotiations with other Member States in 2015. The outcome of the agreement severely affects the welfare benefits for citizens with disabilities. The total annual cut to benefits for disability, low-income pensioners and child allowances will have to be 900 million euros. The current spending of state budget is 1.5 million euros per year⁹.



The Spanish Confederation of Persons with Physical and Organ Disabilities (Cocemfe) referred to Spain’s 2013 Reform Plan as a “huge disappointment for those who are most vulnerable and dependent on administration”. In a plan which sought to save 1,108 million euros annually, many DPOs condemned the cut back to the Spanish law on dependency, leaving many with disabilities far worse off.

The President of Cocemfe, Mario García, described the new measures as “unacceptable, because they will reduce the rights of hundreds of thousands of disabled people who need intensive care for their day-to-day lives and for their autonomy¹⁰”.

In *Catalunya* severe cuts were seen in 2015, most notably to initiatives aiming to help disabled people gain their autonomy. Whereas in 2012 the regional government put aside 4.5 million euros to assist the incorporation of people with intellectual disabilities into the labour market, in 2015 the proposed figure was no more than 2.3 million¹¹.

Furthermore, many DPOs are denouncing the cuts in social assistance. Although at the time the Catalan government denied these allegations, many with family members living with a disability, and disabled persons themselves, are saying the exact opposite. They say that public assistance from the *Generalitat* have been drastically reduced in several areas over the last year.

7 Available at : <http://www.enil.eu/news/edward-scissorhands-the-cuts-in-italy/>

8 Autism-Europe. Short-term savings equals long-term problems for people with autism.

9 Available at : <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2015/08/17/greeces-3-bailout-dramatic-decreases-in-pensions-and-welfare-benefits/>

10 Available at : <http://plataformavoluntariado.org/noticia.php?id=2599>”.

11 Available at : <http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20150120/54423815627/entidades-de-discapitados-denuncian-recortes-de-la-generalitat-en-insercion.html>.