

# Disabled left out in cold by benefit cuts

Jill Sherman, Whitehall Editor

Charities reacted with fury after the chancellor pressed ahead with plans to save £1.3 billion a year by cutting payments covering aids and equipment for the disabled.

George Osborne confirmed measures that will halve the number of points given to disabled people enabling them to buy walking sticks, handles and rails and other equipment to help them live independently.

The changes, which will be phased in from next year, are expected to affect 640,000 disabled people who could lose up to £2,865 a year in personal independence payments (PIP). Others would see their weekly payments drop from £82 to £55 when their award is reviewed. Many of the aids are essential to help disabled people dress, wash or manage their bathroom needs.

"Today the chancellor confirmed benefit changes that will make many disabled people's lives harder," Mark Atkinson, chief executive of Scope, the disability charity, said. "Life costs more if you are disabled — our research shows that this adds up to £550 extra per month. Half of disabled people say they have struggled to pay the bills because of the extra costs of disability that they face."

At the moment claimants need eight points for the £55 standard weekly PIP rate, or 12 points for the £82 enhanced rate. They will now earn only one point instead of two if they use aids and appliances.

Government documents show that the measures to restrict PIP save £590 million next year followed by £1.19 billion in 2018-19 and £1.3 billion in the 2019-20 financial year.

Michelle Mitchell, chief executive of the MS Society, said the changes would increase anxiety for thousands of people with MS. "This is a vital benefit and access to it needs improving, not restricting further. These changes will fail to support those that are most in need. We're deeply concerned and urge the government not to proceed."

Gillian Guy, chief executive of Citizens Advice, said many people relied on PIP to get dressed or use the lavatory and would worry about the impact on their independence.

The policy, only implemented in the past few years, has already had a number of problems, including lengthy delays for medical assessments and appeals. "It's premature for the government to make such a fundamental change to PIP before it's implemented properly," Ms Guy said.

Ministers said the change was brought in because of court rulings that household items costing no extra money counted as aids and appliances.

The chancellor insisted that the disability budget would still rise by more than £1 billion.



Last year's cuts to disability benefits provoked protests in Whitehall: there was more anger yesterday