

Axing of allowances for disabled 'morally wrong', committee told

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The Department of Health's decision to close two allowances for disabled people is "morally wrong" and had frightened many of those affected, Michael McCabe, chairman of the Centre for Independent Living told an Oireachtas committee.

The decision to axe the mobility allowance and motorised transport grant goes against domestic and international policy of including people with disabilities in society, Mr McCabe added.

Gary Lee, chief executive of the centre, told the Oireachtas health committee: "These are the same people the Government tried to take personal assistant services away from last year."

Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly had recommended that eligibility for both schemes be widened but the department announced last month that it could not afford this. It says it will devise alternative schemes.

'Completely unaffordable'

Department secretary general Ambrose McLoughlin said the decision to end the schemes was not taken lightly but had to be made because widening eligibility would have been "completely unaffordable".

He said the department had established a review group to consider what should happen now. The existing €10.6 million funding would be reinvested in whatever solution was found, he promised.

The group is dominated by Government departments and State agencies but also includes representatives of the Irish Wheelchair Association and the Disability Federation of Ireland.

Independent TD Michael Healy Rae accused Mr McLoughlin's department of treating the committee disgracefully for not giving an indication that it might discontinue the two schemes when he appeared before members a month ago. Senator Tony Mulcahy said the money available should be spent on the disabled rather than on advocacy groups that pay their chief executives an average of €150,000 a year.

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