

national information forum

Working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people
by encouraging better information provision

News Briefing No. 10. May 2009

In This
Issue

*A Digest of Current Social Information
For members of the National Information Forum*

ALL TOGETHER NOW!

MEASLES CAN BE DEADLY

NEW HORIZONS FOR THE
DISABILITY LAW SERVICE

RNIB AND ACTION FOR
BLIND PEOPLE HAVE
JOINED FORCES

BENEFITS ADVICE

CHANGES TO DWP
WEBSITES

DEATH BY INDIFFERENCE

UNDERGROUND LIVES

THE COST OF
AFFORDABLE WARMTH

LOCAL HOUSING
ALLOWANCE (LHA)

THE ROLE OF JOBCENTRE
PLUS

A NEW HEALTH
AND SOCIAL CARE
REGULATOR

DIGITAL BOOKS

WELFARE REFORM

CHANGES TO THE RNIB
HELPLINE

WE HATE NO.18 :
INEQUALITY

ALL TOGETHER NOW!

This free bi-monthly magazine for disabled readers (in tabloid newsletter format) is going from strength to strength. It now has a 60,000 circulation and is distributed right across the North West of England via NHS trusts, health centres, visitor attractions and supermarkets. Sponsors include Sellafield UK, NHS North West and United Utilities. The title is, in itself, significant, for it avoids the sectarian view that you have to be disabled to make a meaningful contribution.



Tom Dowling

All Together Now's editor, Tom Dowling, has spent all his working life in journalism and it shows. After a childhood in Liverpool, he moved with his family across the Mersey to Ellesmere Port. Hopes of a professional football career were soon dashed, but as that door shut another opened at *The Pioneer*, his town's local newspaper, where he was taken on as a junior sports reporter, despite (he says) previous abysmal attainments in English. "But the editor was desperate and liked the fact that I could recite England's World Cup winning squad."

Four years later, Tom left the paper to go with three friends on a self-planned overland journey to the Everest base camp. Tragically, on their way back they were attacked on the roadside in Iran. One boy was shot in the head (but made a miraculous recovery); Tom was shot in the back, leaving him totally paralysed from the chest down. Nevertheless, six months later he pushed his way back into journalism (on his town's other newspaper), and later, at the age of 22, he joined the famous *Liverpool Echo*. Having also had a Liverpool childhood, I recall that this was the paper which, among other things, was seen locally as providing the ultimate test of weakness. Anyone lacking in spirit was likely to be described as being unable to punch a hole in a wet *Echo*. Tom epitomised the opposite quality. In 1983, he persuaded the *Echo* to start his award-winning disability column *I Can do That!*. After 26 years it is today the paper's longest running column. In 1997 he went further, creating and editing the *Echo's* tabloid publication of the same name, which went on to win the UK Press Gazette's award as 'Supplement of the Year'.

When, in 2004, the *Echo's* owners were obliged to close the supplement *I Can do That!* on commercial grounds, Tom left the company and set up the new publication, *All Together Now!* to resurrect the unique news service as



a registered charity. It is lively, positive, optimistic, reads like a newspaper and avoids a depressing medical/social services approach. In a word, it is a triumph!

For those who cannot secure print copies there is an award-winning online magazine, updated daily, at www.alltogethernow.org.uk.

MEASLES CAN BE DEADLY

The NHS has asked us to help by publicising the danger associated with measles and the need to protect children by immunisation. They point out that measles is highly contagious and spreads rapidly. A cough or a sneeze is all it takes to spread the virus, so there is a high chance that a child will catch measles if not immunised. For those who catch measles there is a one in ten chance they will need hospital treatment – for anything from a chest infection and fits to kidney failure and brain damage. In one in a thousand cases measles can kill.

The safest protection is free MMR jabs, one at around the age of one year, the second between the ages of three and five years. But if a child has missed these dates, it's never too late for immunisation. NHS advice is to get children immunised by making an appointment at a local GP surgery without delay.

For further information about the MMR jab contact the surgery or visit www.mmrjab.com.

NEW HORIZONS FOR THE DISABILITY LAW SERVICE

For more than 30 years, the Disability Law Service (DLS) has provided high quality, specialist and impartial information and advice to disabled people in six areas of law:

- Disability discrimination
- Consumer affairs and general contract issues
- Community care
- Further and higher education
- Employment
- Welfare benefits.

It can refer clients to other agencies if necessary, and within the above areas also provides a casework service and support at any level of the legal system.

Although the work of the charity has grown dramatically in recent years, it remains a small organisation: but one that with *pro bono* support from lawyers has punched well above its weight. Now a grant from the Big Lottery Fund has given DLS the opportunity of developing its outreach still further through two new projects:

Better Access to the Law will enable DLS, over the next five years, to extend its services to many more disabled people throughout England. The creation and maintenance of a database of organisations working with disabled people and legal service providers will make DLS services better known, improve links and facilitate cross referral for advice. DLS will offer legal training and specialist support for this network of organisations, increasing their knowledge of disability law.

Reach Out will add to this work by reaching out to marginalised disabled people in both England and Wales. DLS is acutely conscious that particular groups, such as those from ethnic minorities, rural areas and traveller communities, experience social exclusion and double disadvantage, often lacking the knowledge to be aware of and to access their legal rights. It recognises the need to network widely, encompassing not only organisations of and

for disabled people, but also those with a wider remit who nevertheless serve the needs of disabled people alongside other concerns. In addition to improving access to legal advice and support in England, a bi-lingual development officer for Wales will conduct a mapping exercise across all 22 Welsh local authority areas. Each organisation will be contacted to take part in an analysis of needs to identify barriers to advice and gaps in the provision of legal advice for disabled people in Wales.

For further information or advice, please contact DLS at 39-45 Cavell Street, London E1 2BP; advice line: 020 7791 9800; e.mail: advice@dls.org.uk; web: www.dls.org.uk.

RNIB AND ACTION FOR BLIND PEOPLE HAVE JOINED FORCES

These two high profile organisations came together with effect from 1 April 2009. Action for Blind People (ABP) has the status of an ‘associate charity’, retaining its own identity within the RNIB group, and is now delivering everything that used to be provided by RNIB’s regional teams in England. Conversely, RNIB will take over some of ABP’s activities. The aims are to collaborate harmoniously rather than compete, and to rationalise services for blind people.

From a more detailed report in the RNIB magazine ‘NB’, April 2009.

BENEFITS ADVICE

The Department of Work and Pensions has developed an online service via the Directgov website to provide information and entitlement advice on 28 benefits, pensions and credits. ‘Customers’ are invited to answer simple questions about their circumstances in order to find out what financial support they could be entitled to. They are also directed to contact details that will help them make a claim and given links to other online information, such as claim services, jobsearch and state pension forecasts.

The service can be found at www.direct.gov.uk/en/MoneyTaxAndBenefits/index.htm.

From DWP’s ‘Touchbase’, March 2009.

CHANGES TO DWP WEBSITES

The main DWP website (www.dwp.gov.uk) was revised in April 2009. It now has a fresh design and a new layout. Advisers and other professionals can still find specialist guidance, news and consultations on then DWP site, but customer information on benefits and services is now on the Directgov, Pensions Service or Jobcentre Plus sites. The Pension Service website will close in Autumn 2009, and the Jobcentre Plus website in Spring 2010. All the information currently available on these websites will be moved to the Directgov website or to Business Link, the Government’s site for businesses and employers.

From DWP’s ‘Touchbase’, March 2009.

DEATH BY INDIFFERENCE

Reports by the Health and Local Government Ombudsmen, Ann Abraham and Jerry White, published on 24 March 2009, have found “significant and distressing failures” in health and social care services. “The quality of care in the NHS and social services for people with learning disabilities is at best patchy and at worst an indictment of our society”. People with a learning disability had experienced “prolonged suffering and poor care”. Taken together, the investigation reports demonstrate an urgent imperative for organisational and cultural change coupled with individual leadership and commitment. The charity Mencap said that the conclusions were a damning indictment which confirmed an “appalling catalogue of neglect”.

The investigation followed a report by Mencap, *Death by Indifference*, in March 2007, which drew attention to the cases of six vulnerable patients who died in NHS or local authority care between 2003 and 2005.

Details at www.mencap.org.uk and www.ombudsman.org.uk.

UNDERGROUND LIVES

A survey of 56 failed asylum seekers by PAFRAS (Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) found that 72 per cent were sleeping outside and that 38 per cent of those sleeping rough had experienced physical attacks.

The report, *Underground Lives*, is available on www.pafras.org.uk; tel: 0113 2622163; e.mail: pafrasemail@yahoo.co.uk.

THE COST OF AFFORDABLE WARMTH

National Energy Action and its sister organisation Energy Action Scotland, working in partnership with central and local government and other organisations, develop and promote energy efficiency services to tackle the heating and insulation problems of low-income households. Their overall aim is to eradicate fuel poverty. Their report, *The Cost of Affordable Warmth* (March 2009) finds that current policies and funding are inadequate to fulfil this aim by 2016. It finds that more than 5 million UK households cannot afford to heat their homes to a safe and healthy level, and examines the impact of poor heating and insulation standards, low income and high energy prices. The report makes recommendations on how these factors should be addressed.

National Energy Action, St. Andrew's House, 90-92 Pilgrim Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 6SG; tel: 0191 261 5677; website: www.nea.org.uk.

LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE (LHA)

LHA was introduced in 2008 for Housing Benefit claimants in the deregulated private rented sector. The DWP has now reviewed its policy in relation to large properties. Regulations are now proposed to cap LHA rates on new claims made on or after 6 April 2009 at the maximum rate for properties with five bedrooms.

From DWP's 'Touchbase', March 2009 (see for further details).

CARROT AND STICK: THE ROLE OF JOBCENTRE PLUS

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) has published a report *Making it work: Analysing different ways of tackling worklessness*. It argues that Jobcentre Plus is hampered in its efforts to assist residents to find work by a system that cannot fully respond to the differing character of its client base. It faces "an impossible task of managing contradictory roles, on the one hand supporting claimants back to work, on the other administering a claimant's package of benefits. The report proposes that Jobcentre Plus should be broken down into two separate bodies.

CLES, Express Networks, 1 George Leigh Street, Manchester M4 5DL; tel: 0161 236 7036; e.mail: info@cles.org.uk; website: www.cles.org.uk.

A NEW HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE REGULATOR

From 1 April 2009, three care regulators – the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the Mental Health Commission and the Healthcare Commission – were replaced by a single new body, the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Its remit is to ensure the quality and safety of services towards the aim of making sure that better care is provided for everyone, wherever it is provided, and to protect the rights of people detained under the Mental Health Act. It covers health, mental health and adult social care (for the first time) and relates to services provided by the NHS, local authorities, private companies or voluntary organisations.

CQC can be contacted at CQC National Correspondence, PO Box 1258, Newcastle upon Tyne NE99 5AU; tel: 03000 616161; e.mail: enquiries@cqc.org.uk; website: www.cqc.org.uk.

DIGITAL BOOKS

Digital versions of books, known as eBooks, and other reading materials are gaining popularity as

an alternative way to access literature of many kinds. A growing range of publications is being made available in this way. They are cheaper to produce and distribute (and thus cost less), and a whole library can be downloaded to a single portable reading device. Many titles are available free.

However, as Heather Cryer, research officer at the RNIB Centre for Accessible Information, points out, eBooks are available in many different formats and choosing, purchasing, downloading, transferring and accessing them can be a long and sometimes complicated process. eBooks in proprietary formats can be read only on their specified players, and most players support only a limited range of formats. And in some cases the text is not accessible to screen reading software. Internet access can also pose problems and users may need to install intermediary software to manage downloading.

There is still a long way to go to enable equal access for blind and partially sighted people, especially when it comes to reading on dedicated eBook players, but overall, Heather concludes, eBooks present an opportunity as a new way for blind and partially sighted people to access digital reading material. Some accessibility features exist within both portable eBook players and computer software which allow eBooks to be read as audio. And RNIB is working with publishers and developers to ensure the needs of blind and partially sighted people are taken into account as this new way of reading develops.

From a more detailed report in the RNIB's magazine 'NB', April 2009.

WELFARE REFORM

In previous *News Briefings* I have been highly critical of the Government's proposals for welfare reform, but have felt decidedly lonely in so doing. Not so. In a trenchant article in the May edition of *Disability Now*, Ruth Patrick has taken several swipes at this ill-timed Bill, and is clear that its general thrust continues to concern many in the disability movement "and beyond" (which includes me). She refers to the Government's "tired emphasis" on work as the best form of welfare, reinforced by the threat of sanctions for those claimants who refuse to engage in programmes to support them into work. She draws attention to the division of claimants into two groups – those thought capable of work and those whose impairments are judged so severe as to prevent them from engaging in paid employment. The former group are expected to participate in "work related activity" or risk having their benefits cut. The second group are not only exempted from sanctions but are awarded a higher level "support" rate of Employment Support Allowance (which in their case thus becomes a misnomer).

Ruth points out that this division of disability claimants carries not only an immediate danger of creating false divisions, but incorrectly writes off the "support" group as incapable. She rightly argues that such divisions are based on a medical model of disability where the impairment is all, neglecting the importance and impact of disabling barriers in society. She finds (as I have done) that the philosophy behind the reforms – that paid work is the best (if not only) way for an adult to contribute to society - "particularly ironic in the current economic climate, where unemployment continues to soar".

As if to reinforce the latter argument, the latest Labour Market statistics show steeply rising unemployment while vacancies are falling. In January 2008, vacancies were 43% of the numbers employed (ILO figures), whereas by February 2009 the ratio had fallen to 20%. What a time to try to move the long-term unemployed from welfare to work!

CHANGES TO THE RNIB HELPLINE

RNIB's helpline is now available on 0303 123 9999 (helpline@rnib.org.uk). Whether the query relates to an eye condition, a product, the RNIB library, benefit entitlements or living with sight

loss, trained advice workers are ready to help. Callers can be put in touch with a trained counsellor, while health and social care professionals can continue to rely on the helpline as a trusted referral route.

WE HATE NO.18 : INEQUALITY

“Whatever may be the general endeavour of a community to render its members equal and alike, the personal pride of individuals will always seek to rise above the line, and to form somewhere an inequality to their own advantage.”

Alexis De Tocqueville: Democracy in America (1835-39)

We have inveighed in previous *Briefings* against the tendency in some occupations to seek a place on the ‘gravy train’ and once aboard to aspire to the highest level of rewards enjoyed by fellow travellers. In contradistinction, we have also drawn attention to the worsening plight of those whose income falls around or below the poverty line. The gap between these extremes, between rich and poor, is somewhat the measure of inequality in our society, widening as these trends move in opposite directions.

In the USA, inequality has sometimes been seen not simply as inevitable, but as part of American greatness. Lester Maddox suggested, as recently as 1966, that inequality breeds freedom and is a spur to opportunity. Here, on this side of the Pond, we rather see inequality – or at least unbridled inequality - as a social evil: evidence of moral decay and a malaise just now that is running out of control. There is no need again to recite the excesses of the greedy, which have recently been seen to have infected even the body politic. But it is instructive to consider the other end of the spectrum. New Labour has signally failed even to meet its own targets of reductions in child and pensioner poverty. Deprivation has gone from bad to worse and most of its victims are trapped in their misfortune. Children from minority ethnic groups are notably disadvantaged compared with white British children, with levels of poverty particularly high in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Oxfam, the charity famous for focusing on third world poverty, is “alarmed” at the state of affairs in Britain, pointing out that the recent budget failed to address the needs of our poorest people. It argues that the protection given by the welfare state is inadequate. To make matters worse (as we have noticed in previous *Briefings*), poor households face inflation rates well above the average because they have to spend a disproportionate part of their income on those necessities that have particularly risen in price: food and fuel. Oxfam has called on the Government to bring forward a rescue plan, including an emergency increase in out-of-work benefits and steps to make it easier for people to move from benefits to work.

But the position of those who are able to move into low-income work is little better. Helpfully, following the release of the annual Households Below Average Income data for 2007/08 on 7 May, *The Guardian* rapidly published details of people in poverty and a representation of the British Inequality Index since 1961. The HBAI figures show that the number of people living in poverty in the UK has increased to 13.5 million. 7.5 million of them are of working age. *The Guardian* report notices that the figures show that the real earnings of those on low wages were lower in 2008 than they were in 2005. New Labour inherited an unequal society in 1997, but has presided over cuts in the incomes of those at the bottom of the pile, while tolerating a free-for-all at the top. The Index reveals that inequality in Britain is 38% higher than it was in 1961, and is now at levels “not seen under Macmillan, Heath, Thatcher or Major”.

What does such inequality, unprecedented in modern times, mean for our society? A new book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, has many of the answers. Based on long and painstaking research (by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett), it finds that “more unequal societies are bad for almost everyone within them – the well-off as well as the

poor". I like the use of the word "almost". It has that emphasis of understatement also found in the bus advertisements that proclaimed that there "probably" is no God. Scrutiny starts with the indisputable health inequalities between people at different levels in the social hierarchy in modern societies. Of course, everyone dies, but some go more early than others, and generally the link to social status is clear: just as it was (if more dramatically) in Manchester during the industrial revolution, when average life expectancy among the poor was 17 years. The fact that poor health and violence are more common in unequal societies is well known, but Wilkinson and Pickett examine in detail the hypothesis that a host of other social problems that are more common at the bottom of the social ladder are also more common in more unequal societies. They support the view that material inequality is divisive and an obstacle to a wider human harmony. In unequal societies competition supplants co-operation, so that "people are less caring of one another, there is less mutuality in relationships, people have to fend for themselves and get what they can." The final chapter, 'Building the future', begins with a quotation from Tom Scholz which I find particularly apt: "Turning corporations loose and letting the profit motive run amok is not a prescription for a more liveable world."

Enthusiastic that the perspective they outline should permeate the public mind, the authors have set up a not-for-profit Trust to try to make the relevant evidence better known. Its website is at www.equalitytrust.org.uk, and I think that readers will find a visit most rewarding. It provides a summary of the evidence on each of eleven health and social problems, supporting the belief that in order to gain substantial improvements in the real quality of life of the populations of developed countries it is necessary that differences in income and wealth are greatly reduced.

We are strengthened in hating inequality. But that is not enough. Change is needed, and the Equality Trust website provides an opportunity to sign up to a charter asserting that:

- current levels of inequality are unfair and socially damaging
- greater equality leads to happier, more cohesive, healthier and safer societies
- greater equality is an essential part of sustainable societies and of the fight against global warming
- greater equality is achievable.

Oh, and by the way, the problems of international inequalities between rich and poor countries are not overlooked. In the final chapter of *The Spirit Level*, the authors say that the evidence strongly suggests that narrowing income differences within rich countries will make them more responsive to the needs of poorer countries.

The Equality Trust can be contacted at 32-36 Loman Street, London SE1 0EH; tel: 020 7922 7927. *The Spirit Level* is available from Amazon for £12.80.

This information sheet has been compiled by Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum.