

# national information forum

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

News Briefing No. 17. January 2010

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For members of the National Information Forum*

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## 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DISABLED LIVING FOUNDATION (DLF)

The DLF celebrated its 40th anniversary in an event hosted by Lord Morris of Manchester at the House of Lords on 2 December. It was apt that Alf Morris should front the event, for the DLF formally came into being on 7 November 1969, the day following the annual ballot for Private Members' Bills. It is a matter of history that Alf came top in that ballot, paving the way for his seminal Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill. He made sure that the final text included provisions for new and wide-ranging practical assistance in the home and for help in the fields of education, employment, housing, outdoor mobility and personal social services, and to improve information about this assistance. It was followed between 1974 and 1979 with Alf's appointment as the world's first Minister for Disabled People. The DLF and other disability organisations knew that at least for this short time they had a friend at the heart of Government.

We in the National Information Forum can also claim a strong affinity with the DLF. Our mission has long been to improve the provision of information to disabled people, and the DLF has always been conspicuously proactive in doing just that, letting people know what help was available and providing free and impartial advice. When Ann and I compiled the first edition of *Directory for Disabled People*, published in 1977 and welcomed in a foreword by Alf Morris, there were no fewer than nine references to the DLF. In preparing this article we have also returned to the minutes of the Forum's first exploratory meeting on 19 February 1980 and have confirmed that the DLF was represented at this and subsequent meetings by Sarah Lomas. More than that, when the Forum found itself without accommodation, the DLF took us in and provided a desk.

Guests at the 40th Anniversary event received *Helping people for forty years, a brief history of the DLF, Life is for Living, a guide to DLF and Living made easy*, all showing that the organisation is in good heart and has moved on to take advantage of new technology. But the outstanding feature of the day was the speech of Chief Executive, Christine Shaw, which highlighted the priorities of a generation which is living longer than earlier expectations. A recent poll of a sample of 2,050 UK adults, carried out by YouGov for the DLF, found emphatically that losing independence is a bigger ageing worry than dying (49% to 29%). When asked about the things that concern them most about getting older, 68% said that losing independence or becoming dependent on others came a close second to concerns about ill health (74%).



Notwithstanding the current financial climate and pension concerns, struggling to make ends meet came in third (44%).

The survey also revealed that almost half of the sample (44%) were worried about having to move into a care home in old age. The clear message is that thanks to better health care and healthier lifestyles, more people than ever are living to 100, but as the UK's older population continues to grow rapidly and the demands placed on the welfare system increases, there is both a need and a desire for people to be able to retain their independence and stay in their own homes as long as possible.

Christine Shaw said: "Getting older should not be a barrier to having choice and control over the quality of your life, or be a reason to move out of your own home. Many older people just need help, ideas and advice about the simple equipment that exists to help them with daily tasks and to lead full, active and safe lives. The tasks that most older people struggle with include getting into and out of the bath, using stairs and preparing food, including opening packaging and containers. But these shouldn't be reasons for people to rely on home help or be forced to move."

**For help and information about equipment and gadgets to make daily life easier, visit DLF's impartial advice website [www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk](http://www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk), or call the DLF helpline 0845 130 9177 (local rate, 10am-4pm Monday-Friday).**

### **DR FOSTER'S DIAGNOSIS**

Reliable information, however disturbing, is illuminating. Dr. Foster's Hospital Guide 2009, covering 146 English NHS trusts, concentrated on patient safety. It has been well reported, but we feel we should focus on some of its salient points. Firstly, that the scores vary so widely: from 100 to zero. Secondly, that 69 (over 47%) of the 146 trusts scored under 50. Finally, that in a number of cases poor scores were recorded in trusts that had previously been commended by the regulator, the Care Quality Commission. While it is true that Dr Foster's published analysis, this year, was more narrowly drawn than that of the regulator, the disparities are worrying. Curious, also, that two separate bodies are scrutinising performance. Can someone tell us which is more trustworthy?

The lamentable performance of some trusts reinforces the criticism by the Patients' Association reported in *News Briefing no.14*. We recall also that before the scandal at Mid Staffordshire came to light the then regulator, Monitor, had pronounced favourably upon the hospital.

**Dr. Foster's findings are at [www.drfoosterhealth.co.uk](http://www.drfoosterhealth.co.uk).**

### **SOCIAL FUND UNDER SCRUTINY**

The 2008/09 Annual Report of Sir Richard Tilt, the Social Fund Commissioner, makes grim reading, but we commend it to anyone who seeks to identify the shortcomings of the Social Fund and the quality of its delivery by Jobcentre Plus. Overall, inspectors of the Independent Review Service (IRS) changed no less than 49.2% of the decisions they reviewed. In the case of community care grants and crisis loan decisions over half were varied, resulting in a spend of £3,658,366. This level of error is surely nothing short of scandalous and disgraceful.

Among other things, Sir Richard regards it as "essential" that the DWP takes action to secure an appropriate increase in the grants budget "so that all high priority needs can be met consistently across Great Britain". By implication, they are not being so met at present.

He further makes a number of suggestions:

- that the DWP takes urgent action to develop and deliver effective programmes to raise awareness of the Social Fund amongst eligible people of pension age across Great Britain.  
[Jean Cooper please note]
- that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions raises issues about local authority statutory duties to disabled people with her counterpart with responsibility for Communities and Local Government with a view to ensuring those duties are properly discharged. Legislation places duties upon local authorities to assess and provide for needs within available resources. Whereas the IRS identified some cases in which social services had failed to conduct a proper assessment of need. In a number of cases it was found that the authority appeared to have fettered the discretion of decision makers as to what kind of aids and equipment they can provide. In other cases, social services have emphasised that an item is crucial for a disabled person, but have purported to have discharged their statutory duty by referring the person to the Social Fund.

**The report can be seen and downloaded from [www.irs-review.org.uk](http://www.irs-review.org.uk) (click on Social Fund Commissioner's Annual Report and click on link). A print copy can be requested from [Justine.Bird@irs-review.org.uk](mailto:Justine.Bird@irs-review.org.uk).**

### **HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDED**

Readers who are not members of Liberty may have missed Lord Bingham of Cornhill's keynote address at the organisation's 75th Anniversary Conference. It is simply unmissable, and has been published in full in Liberty's Autumn 2009 newsletter. Human rights are frequently attacked by those who, in Lord Bingham's words, "find it less trouble to attack them than to try to understand what they mean." We expect the transcript be added to Liberty's website at [www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk](http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk).

### **RISING NUMBERS IN EDUCATION OR TRAINING**

Government statistics reveal that 14.5 million people (one in four of the entire population of England) are now in education or training. The number has risen steadily since 1950, accelerating markedly in the late 70s and still growing.

Whereas in the late 50s only about one tenth of school leavers achieved five O levels, more than four times that proportion will now gain a university degree.

And whereas nearly one in five black men are unemployed (18.2%, more than twice the rate for white British men), minority ethnic people are over-represented in further and higher education.

**Sources: Ethnic Minority Labour Force Status report  
Guardian, 14 October 2009, 1 December 2009**

### **A NEW LEADER AT JOBCENTRE PLUS**

We have reported previously on misgivings about the performance of Jobcentre Plus offices. It is to be hoped that greater dynamism will follow the appointment of a new CEO from 1 December. Darren Singh is a high profile choice. He has had a long involvement in a number of housing organisations, has served as Chief Executive on Luton and Ealing councils, and has made a name as chair of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

### **YOUR DOORSTEP, YOUR DECISION**

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has launched a campaign to promote awareness of rogue doorstep sellers, especially among elderly people – particularly women who live alone – and those who are housebound or socially isolated. The aim is to educate people about how they can protect themselves.

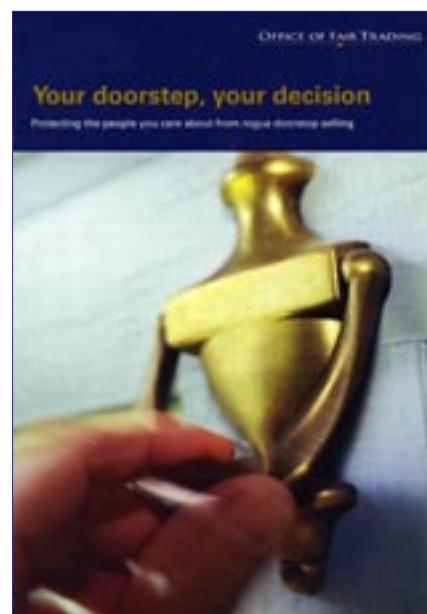
Buying goods or services in your home or on your doorstep can be convenient – but it poses a serious risk from rogue traders. The OFT points out that people can be pressurised into buying something they don't want, which is not good value for money, or is of poor quality.

Over 3,500 complaints to Consumer Direct about uninvited doorstep selling approaches were received in the first seven months of 2009 alone, especially regarding home repairs and services.

The OFT has developed a number of campaign materials that are available for distribution:

- a leaflet aimed at the 70+ audience (OFT1116)
- a booklet (OFT1117)
- a door hanger to serve as a reminder (OFT1118)
- an information film available on [www.youtube.com/user/OFTWebEditor](http://www.youtube.com/user/OFTWebEditor) (OFT1133)

**To order these free materials, which are available in English or Welsh, phone 0800 389 3158, quoting the relevant product code.**



### **AN ACTION PLAN TO IMPROVE DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS**

Harriet Harman, Minister for Women and Equality, has launched a cross government drive to increase the number of women, black, Asian and minority (BAME) ethnic people and disabled people on the boards of public bodies.

Women represent 51% of the population, but make up only 33.3% of public appointees. 14% of the working-age population has a disability, but disabled people make up only 5% of public appointees. Less than 6% of public appointees are from an ethnic minority background, despite the overall ethnic minority population being nearly 11%.

The cross government action plan, launched in June, is co-led by the Government Equalities Office and Cabinet Office and includes measures such as mentoring and raising awareness, as well as setting targets on gender, disability and ethnicity. The aim is that by 2011, 50% of new appointments will be women, 14% will be disabled people and 11% will be from ethnic minorities.

Harriet Harman said: “Diversity brings fresh perspectives, new ideas and broader experience on which to draw. Ensuring diverse groups play an active role in public life strengthens our democracy. We all stand to benefit from the improved decision making that can come from a wider range of contributions.”

The measures set out in the new action plan include:

- A new mentoring scheme to work with high potential applicants, ‘near hits’ – those who didn't get through to the final stages when applying for a public appointment role.
- A media campaign around national and regional events to promote opportunities in public bodies.
- Better use of the internet to raise awareness of public appointments.
- Gathering a stronger evidence base on the barriers faced by under-represented groups when applying for appointments.

**Go to [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk) and search for ‘Diversity in public appointments’.**

## **SILENT CARS**

Lord Low of Dalston, former chair of the RNIB, speaking in the House of Lords, has raised concerns about the danger to pedestrians posed by near-silent electric and hybrid cars. In response, Lord Adonis, the Transport Secretary, announced that a nine-month research project will begin early next year to look at this problem. Such vehicles represent less than one per cent of the total UK fleet, yet the dangers are obvious and real, particularly – but not only - for people with visual impairments. A number of innovative ideas were put forward, including reference to a suggestion from Lord McColl that such cars be fitted with a cowbell.



**Source:** *NB*, the RNIB magazine, December 2009.

**Debate:** 10 November 2009 on [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

## **STATISTICS**

The latest ONC statistics indicate that at September 2009 4.54 million people were claiming Housing Benefit (almost two-thirds of them of working age and mainly social sector tenants), and 5.56 million were claiming Council Tax Benefit.

## **DEMENTIA GATEWAY**

By the year 2021, it is estimated that one million people in the UK will have dementia – many more will be involved in their informal care. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), in conjunction with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, has produced joint guidelines on dementia for health and social care staff. SCIE has also developed a new dementia website at [www.scie.org.uk/publications/dementia/index.asp](http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/dementia/index.asp). This resource was originally developed with care home staff and domiciliary care workers in mind, but will be useful to anyone who comes into contact with a person with dementia. The content addresses the many different facets of dementia – types, symptoms, myths and experiences. A crucial element in developing these products has been involvement from people with dementia themselves, and their carers.

**Sources:** *scieline*, the magazine of scie, October 2009; *Supporting Social Care for Adults* (SCIE booklet).

## **THE PERMITTED WORK RULE**

Hitherto, this rule – which allows disabled people to try out paid work while remaining in receipt of disability related state benefits – has required that the work must be therapeutic. This requirement has been removed. There is now no need for a doctor's approval, but Jobcentre Plus must be told that the claimant is starting permitted work. The rules are explained in the Disabled People Section of [www.directgov.uk](http://www.directgov.uk), which includes the advice that claimants should discuss their intentions with their personal advisor or Disability Employment Adviser. Oh, and the permitted income is potentially liable to income tax.

## **DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE**

While DLA is not means-tested, people in receipt of the benefit who are contemplating taking

paid work should be aware that the Department of Work and Pensions regards starting work as a potential change of circumstances and that this could affect entitlement to the allowance. The Spinal Injuries Association advises that claimants may be asked to explain their care needs in work, and that when doing this they should consider carefully what 'attention' they need to do their job.

**Source: Forward, the SIA magazine, October 2009.**

### **DIRECT PAYMENTS**

Direct payments are cash payments made by local authorities to people who have been assessed as needing social services, allowing them to make their own arrangements to meet their needs, as an alternative to the services being provided by the authority. While the number of people in receipt of direct payments is rising, provisional figures for England from the NHS Information Centre show that in 2008-09 only 6.5 % received monetary social care support.

From 9 November new regulations have extended the scheme to people who lack the capacity to consent, and to people with mental health problems who are subject to mental health and certain criminal justice legislation.

**Sources: NHS Information Centre  
[www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) (social care)**

### **SILVER SURFERS' DAY 2010 IS FRIDAY, 21 MAY**

In 2009, schools, libraries, community groups, companies and organisations working with older people ran over a thousand events to mark Silver Surfers' Day, designed to help those not using computers and the internet to find out how digital technology can make their lives better.

This year the emphasis will be on intergenerational partnerships, involving schools and young people's organisations in spreading the word. But everyone is welcome to join in, even people who want to run an event in their own home.

**To find out more and keep up to date go to <http://silversurfers.digitalunite.com/>.**

### **CAN ANYONE EXPLAIN?**

It may come as no surprise that we don't know everything. One aspect of our benefits system that perplexes us is the inner mysteries of Working Tax Credits. Both Nick Clegg and Vince Cable have recently called for the raising of the Income Tax threshold to take lower paid workers out of tax. But would not this have the effect of benefitting all taxpayers and be inordinately expensive? And aren't Working Tax Credits already intended to achieve the objective of cutting tax for those on low pay? If so, is it not beyond the genius of HMRC to build-in credits within the PAYE system? Thus a taxable income of, say, £14k might attract a tax abatement of 20%, £13k 40%, £12k 60%, £11k 80%, £10k 100%.

### **THE APPOINTMENTS LINE**

Another query arising from personal experience. Derek recently needed a hospital appointment. He was offered two choices: Guys and St Thomas's (which in practice operate as one) and was happy with the choice. He approached them direct and waited for a date to be offered. Meanwhile, however, The Appointments Line in Milton Keynes sent him a series of reminder letters intimating that he had failed to 'choose and book'. Eventually, they wrote to say that it appeared these hospitals book their appointments through their own Patient Administration System and not via the Choose and Book system, and indeed still more eventually a convenient appointment was received by post from the hospital.

Our query is whether The Appointments Line fulfils a useful function. Would not the system work better if managed locally? We suspect that in the majority of cases patients will want to go to the most accessible and well-regarded local hospital, but if in a particular area this is not the case arrangements could be made on an exceptional basis.

The Department of Health has commented that the 'choose and book' system is "a big step towards giving patients greater involvement in the decisions about their treatment and, since its introduction, over 11 million patients have now been referred to specialist care" (but isn't this inevitable if people are steered in that direction?). Moreover, that "most people who use the system like it...Patients say they value being able to choose an appointment date, time and place that is convenient for them."

We would welcome feedback, particularly from the Patients' Association.

### **BUILDING BRITAIN'S RECOVERY**

Yes please. The DWP launched a white paper '*Building Britain's Recovery: Achieving Full Employment*' on 15 December. Ambitious title. Actually the target is 80 per cent, which may be achievable. But Yvette Cooper spells out in the foreword that the Government's aim is not just to get people into jobs, but to help them "stay in work, progress in work, and find employment that is satisfying and that fits with the rest of their lives." Fine words, but are they realistic?

**Go to [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk), and search.**

### **WE HATE NO. 25 : CONSUMERISM**

*The consumer today is the victim of the manufacturer who launches on him a regiment of products for which he must make room in his soul.*

Mary McCarthy: '*America the Beautiful – the Humanist in the Bathtub*', *On the Contrary* (1961)

Consumerism has several definitions. We should explain that our target here is the pursuit of happiness through consumption and the acquisition of material possessions. Even that must be qualified, for it is undeniable that consumption does bring (though not guarantee) happiness and can be economically beneficial. So let us narrow down what we have in our sights by prefacing consumerism with the adjective 'inordinate', particularly if financed by borrowing.

You may think that recent events tend to show that our nation, somewhat in common with other developed countries, has mislaid its sense of values and lost touch with its financial (even moral) compass. Remarkably, we pay an Italian coach (admittedly talented) £6.1 million a year to manage England's football squad, more than three times the nearest equivalent post holder (Marcello Lippi in Italy). Bankers and other executives claim extraordinary salaries and bonuses, a number of BBC entertainers are paid fabulous salaries, while some Members of Parliament have been caught up in a monstrous expenses scandal. It is small wonder then that the common person increasingly aspires to a better life, even in some cases to a second home. Not content with maintaining and cleaning one house and paying one whack of Council Tax, these enthusiastic duettists voluntarily duplicate their commitments, travelling huge distances to get away from their first to their second abode, or perhaps vice versa. Even more of us, no longer satisfied by simple things, fork out hard-earned cash and travel huge distances in pursuit of trivial pastimes and relaxation. Unfortunately, many – particularly after Christmas - are now left counting the cost, saddled with a burden of debt.

Advertisements present alluring, seductive scenarios, sometimes aimed at children, and are apparently (and remarkably) effective in shaping our cupidity. Obvious lifestyle mutations can be seen in our addiction to gadgets and gismos, and the metamorphosis of homespun products into

ever-more elaborate forms. This is not so much a Darwinian evolution as the survival of the most profitable. Try, we suggest, to find soaps in a contemporary chemist's shop. They are still there, but diminished. You will more readily encounter 'handwash', in a range of colours with a plunger dispenser; along with a vast range of gels, lotions, hair colourings, specialist razors, even 'shower therapies', enough to satiate Narkissos. And there are a plentiful number of eager customers jostling to buy these intemperate luxuries.

Supermarkets – those gargantuan, impersonal temples of temptation - epitomise the psychology of consumerism, creating as well as meeting demand, luring the unwary to join a bonanza of prodigality. Many of them will feature conditional offers – such as 'buy two, save 50 pence' – calculated to increase rather than reduce spending, expanding consumption and, may we suggest, transferring wastage from the store to the consumer. (In the UK it is estimated that one way or another food waste alone now amounts to more than 8 million tons). The sale of cheap alcohol is a particular concern. You can now transform your living room – if you have one - into a saloon bar, the perfect snug, and be helped to face the challenges of life without ever going to a pub: twice the quantity at half the cost.

Those who lack the wherewithal can readily buy into the good life by using the friendly plastic credit card, confusing need with desire and capitulating wisdom to gratification by agreeing to pay rates of interest hugely above those available to savers. It is commonly alleged that the blame for our present recession lies with bankers who went in for irresponsible, reckless lending. But no less culpable are those consumers who allowed themselves to be seduced to take on burdens of debt that they could not repay, creating a culture of massive over-indulgence that almost brought the nation to financial ruin.

None of this, of course, is new. Thorstein Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' as long ago as 1899. Make no mistake, consumers are an endangered species. In this and previous issues we have drawn attention to the concern of the Office of Fair Trading over some of the perils of spending. The recession teaches a sharp lesson that as individuals there is a need for caution, or – dare we say it - what Gordon Brown used to call 'prudence', before it all went pear-shaped.

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**This information sheet has been compiled by Ann Darnbrough and Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum. Earlier News Briefings are available on the Forum's website: [www.nif.org.uk](http://www.nif.org.uk).**