

national information forum

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

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

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THE DWP ANNUAL FORUM

In issues 7, 8 and 10 (January to May, 2009) we weighed in against the Labour government's White Paper, *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future*. We noticed that David Freud, an investment banker who had been advising James Purnell, was to join the Conservative front bench, "apparently attracted by the potential future opportunity to implement his reform agenda". It should have come as no surprise, therefore, to find Lord Freud delivering the keynote speech as the Coalition's Minister for Welfare Reform at this year's DWP forum for third sector representatives. Thus there is a continuous policy thread on this vital issue, and the same architect behind the draconian proposals. But what if his thinking is misconceived and the trenchant criticisms of Ruth Patrick in the May 2009 issue of *Disability Now* were justified?

Just what did Lord Freud have to say? To begin with (we interpret rather than quote) that the reform agenda is designed to simplify and make the system more coherent, with the emphasis on the road to work. In this objective the third sector has an important role and it is recognised that there must be differential rewards [for those placing people into work] to acknowledge differences in the difficulties faced. In the past the emphasis had been on simply getting people a job [any kind of job], but experience had shown that there is a need for employment to be sustainable and secure, allowing skills to be developed. The broad aim is to get a substantial proportion of Incapacity Benefit claimants into fulfilling work, rather than simply remaining as recipients of 'charity'. The assessment of capability is to be seen as a progressive strategy, empowering individuals currently abandoned to dependency. There is a need for a 'culture shift' that rewards work. The present arrangements act as a disincentive and introduce a fear factor that discourages people from taking a financial risk by entering the world of work. A key aim, therefore, is to provide assurance and encouragement, a strategy that will need the support of the third sector.

We hope that this is a fair summary of a decidedly low-key presentation. A sharper message followed in a workshop devoted to the reassessment of Incapacity Benefits customers for entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance, with a pack setting out the specific procedures for change (can the smiling faces on the cover be those of claimants?) The key points are that from October 2010 some one and a half million people will be reassessed over a three year period (equating to 9,730 a week). The reassessment is intended to focus on what an individual can do despite their health condition,



rather than what they can't do. Those who are most disabled or terminally ill will be moved onto Employment and Support Allowance without any reduction in the level of their benefit entitlement. But those who are found to be capable of work will be moved onto Jobseeker's Allowance (if they satisfy the conditions of entitlement for that benefit). This is based on the Government's belief that for most people appropriate work is good for their health and well-being. The DWP estimates that around 23% of the people reassessed will be found fit for work and about half of these will be moved onto Jobseeker's Allowance.

The work capability assessments will be carried out by Atos Healthcare, the DWP's health services contractor (www.atoshealthcare.com), and will inform a decision to be made by Jobcentre Plus. There will be a right of appeal to an independent tribunal, but this must be made in writing.

We would not wish to criticise the DWP's role in this process, in that the Department must put into effect the strategies of its political masters. We are glad that Roger Pugh, a team leader in the DWP Communications Directorate, always reads this News Briefing. But as representatives of the third sector we have to say that we felt as if we were being invited to sharpen the executioner's axe. Time will tell.

COME OFF IT ENGLAND

The football World Cup campaign has exposed the fact that you can't guarantee success by throwing money at players, manager and support staff. Indeed there is a powerful argument that excessive remuneration and associated luxurious lifestyles, while attractive to the Treasury, are counter-productive. We think, moreover, that this principle applies well beyond the trivial arena of sporting achievements.

FAITH ADVISERS

In January, the Department for Communities and Local Government appointed 13 'faith advisers' to offer guidance on "the big issues facing society". John Denham, then the Communities Minister, who sees himself as a secular humanist, nevertheless represented these appointments as a means of supporting and enhancing the contribution faith makes to the central issues of our time. Secular groups took a different view, arguing that the elevation of religious 'insights' was insulting to non-religious people. The notion that religious values should have a special place in the decision-making process appeared to suggest that the values of non-religious people are of no importance. This discrimination in favour of religious opinion [itself not necessarily harmonious], happening at all levels of government, effectively disempowered a large proportion of the population.

We would like to know what has become, post election, of advice based on diverse, unsubstantiated beliefs.

THE POVERTY TSAR

Curious that a title associated with the Russian monarchy should be attached to someone charged with relieving poverty. Nevertheless, at the beginning of June it was announced that Labour MP, Frank Field, had been asked to head an "independent" review into UK poverty, with a report to the Prime Minister by the end of this year on what the Government can do "to improve the lives of the least advantaged people in our society". It will not have escaped attention that such people tend to die much earlier than the most advantaged.

An indication of Field's thinking emerged in a lecture to the Attlee Foundation later in the month when he commented on the need to move the social agenda away from the drive to get young mothers into work, regardless of whether this would be consistent with the needs of their children. In his view, the primary malaise lies with men who will not [or cannot?] shoulder the responsibility of caring for their families. He went so far as to suggest that men who refuse to accept work when it is offered by government should face total loss of benefits. Just how this would serve to relieve family poverty is unclear to us.

FIGHTING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Across Europe, five and a half million young people under 25 are currently out of work. Their unemployment rate is twice that of the overall rate and those who have just graduated have no place to go. Here the number of graduates chasing every job has risen to nearly 70. Employers are reluctant to hire newcomers because they have no experience. In consequence millions of young people are ending up in underpaid traineeships, and internships are beginning to replace real jobs. This is a huge challenge that requires positive and urgent action.

Emilie Turunen, the youngest MEP, is calling for two initiatives: firstly a quality charter on internships, secondly the introduction of a European Youth Guarantee to ensure that young people will not remain unemployed for longer than four months and will be given the right to a job, training, education or upskilling.

More at www.europarl.europa.eu/news

DISABILITY ADVICE FOR WALES

The Disability Law Service was commissioned by the Community Legal Service to write a report on the provision of legal advice and services to disabled people in Wales. This bilingual report is now available to download from the DLS website (www.dls.org.uk).

DISABLED PEOPLE IN BRITAIN

The Disability Law Service has also compiled a survey of data, studies and reports relating to disabled people in the nation as a whole.

EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORT ALLOWANCE

ESA was introduced on 27 October 2008 to replace Incapacity Benefit for new claimants. As mentioned in our brief comment on the DWP Annual Forum, a programme to reassess claimants awarded IB before that date will begin in October 2010. The expectation is that while most of these claimants will be moved to ESA, a significant proportion will be deemed fit for work, only some of whom will qualify for Jobseeker's Allowance. Crucial to the award of ESA are the administrative functions of Jobcentre Plus and the Work Capability Assessments carried out by Atos Healthcare, the DWP's health contractor.

The arrangements having been operative for more than a year, Citizens Advice has produced two papers based on its clients' experiences. These are *Limited Capability* (November 2009) and *Not Working* (March 2010). Both are available in print or via www.citizensadvice.org.uk. The first, we feel, is not too disturbing. There have been some problems inherent in a telephone-based system, particularly for claimants solely reliant on mobile phones. There have also been a lot of complaints about delays in processing claims, particular difficulties in applying special rules criteria to ESA for terminally ill people, and a lack of clarity in award letters. But on the whole "the technical roll out of the new benefit went fairly smoothly".

It is the second paper that causes grave concern, particularly given the huge impending 'migration' of IB claimants. This concerns the Work Capability Assessments and finds that:

- seriously ill people are inappropriately subjected to the WCA
- the WCA does not effectively measure fitness for work
- application of the assessment is producing inappropriate outcomes.

The fear is that people with substantial barriers to work are nevertheless being deemed fit for work. One eminent welfare adviser told us that he anticipates an overwhelming recourse to appeal.

YOUR READING CHOICES

The RNIB has launched a new online service designed to help people with sight loss to find the most appropriate solution to allow them to continue reading, based on their individual circumstances. People are invited to answer 30 simple questions to generate a personal reading plan identifying places where they can get books, newspapers and magazines in formats other than standard print, and the organisations that can provide resources or further information and help.

The project is a joint endeavour by the RNIB National Library Service, Share the Vision and the Society of Chief Librarians, and is supported by the Ulverscroft Foundation.

Based on an article in the *Library and Information Gazette*, 1-14 July 2010. For further details go to www.readingsight.org.uk.

INDEPENDENT LIVING FUND: ANOTHER RETROGRADE STEP

No new applications are being accepted. Budgetary restraints mean that only existing beneficiaries are being supported.

PERSONAL CARE AT HOME

In *News Briefing no.20* (April 2010) we commented on the Labour legislation to provide, within defined limits, for personal care at home. These hastily conceived measures will not now be brought into effect. Instead, the Coalition will establish an independent commission to advise on the funding of long-term care, to report within a year. The commission will consider a range of ideas, including a voluntary insurance scheme to protect the assets of those who may need long-term care and a partnership scheme proposed by Sir Derek Wanless. Other planned reforms include:

- breaking down the barriers between health and social care funding,
- extending the roll-out of personal budgets to older people, disabled people and carers,
- increasing direct payments to carers,
- developing community-based provision to improve access to respite care.
- reforming Access to Work to enable disabled people to secure funding for necessary work-related adaptations and equipment before they apply for jobs.

NO SEX PLEASE, WE'RE BRITISH

The power of the Christian lobby, though diminished and diminishing, is not to be underestimated. In the 'wash-up' of Labour bills before the General Election, one of the measures in the mix was the Children, Schools and Families Bill. Particular objection had been taken to a provision to make personal, social, health and economic education part of the compulsory national curriculum in England. This included sex and relationships education, covering such divisive issues as 'the nature of civil partnerships and the importance of strong and stable relationships'. Christian and other religious groups fulminated over the transfer of power over the content of sex education from parents and school governors to ministerial guidance, as well as the inclusion of evolution in the primary school science curriculum. To secure passage of the bill the disputed curriculum reforms were quietly dropped.

The Daily Mail and the *Daily Telegraph* gave thanks, but a number of leading children's, health and educational organisations, including the British Humanist Association, signed a joint statement expressing deep dismay at the removal of the proposed sex and relationships education from the national curriculum. Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the BHA, commented "Good sex and relationships education is known to reduce unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted infections, as well as equip young people with the language and tools to be clear about personal boundaries, understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and know who to talk to when they need help. For older children it helps them resist pressure, make safe choices and challenge misleading and inappropriate messages about sex in the media. It makes a hugely significant contribution to young people's health and well-being. There was massive support for its implementation from health professionals, teachers, parents and young people themselves. The loss of these subjects as core parts of the curriculum is catastrophic."

Well said, Andrew, but for the time being we must exclude those religious parents who have an agenda in favour of ignorance and obfuscation, not to mention those parents – like mine – simply not up to the job. Incidentally, we would like to see sex education that includes how to make love well and satisfying: at present this seems to be left to the pornographers.

DON'T PUSH ME AROUND

Barnardo's and Whizz-Kidz have published a report on disabled children's experiences of UK wheelchair services. It finds that reform and improvement is urgently needed. "Without it, disabled children with mobility needs will continue to lose out, not only on their personal development and childhood but on opportunities to become more independent as adults."

More at www.barnardos.org.uk

STOP AND SEARCH

On 8 July, the Home Secretary announced the suspension of broad stop and search powers under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 200. This follows determined action through the courts by the human rights watchdog Liberty.

Comment at www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk.

IMMIGRATION

Home Office statistics (March) show that some 4,200 unaccompanied child asylum seekers are being supported by Britain's local authorities. In recent times many of them have arrived from Afghanistan.

BAN THE BURKA?

Calls to ban the burka have surfaced. We said our piece in *News Briefing no.12* (August 2009) and stand by it. We did not suggest a ban; rather that intelligent Muslims should have a rethink. We agree that a ban on an item of clothing would be un-British. Equally, however, we feel that wearing the burka is profoundly un-British and divisive. It has even been suggested (by Liberty's lawyers) that for an MP to refuse to 'see' a burka-clad constituent would infringe the Equality Act. What then about shops that refuse to admit 'hoodies' or even young people wearing jeans? And can Glyndebourne Opera insist on evening dress?

HIGH-PRICED LENDING

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has published a review of the £7.5 billion high-cost credit sector, typically used by people on low incomes who cannot access mainstream credit sources and who borrow small sums for short periods. Although interest rates are high, the OFT found, perhaps surprisingly, that in a number of respects these providers served their clients reasonably well. The review found, of course, that there is some room for improvement, but it was recognised that the effect of its recommendations can make only a limited difference. "More radical approaches which are beyond the OFT's remit would be required if the Government or others wanted to tackle the wider social, economic and financial context in which high-cost credit markets exist." We hope that this is something that Frank Field can consider in his current work.

Comment at www.offt.gov.uk (press release 15 June).

WE HATE NO. 32: POVERTY

"Wherever there is excessive wealth, there is also in the train of it excessive poverty; as, where the sun is brightest, the shade is deepest."

Walter Savage Landor, 'Aristoteles and Callisthenes', *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-53).

Some years ago (it may be better now) Ann invited me to join her in a visit to India. She had previously been involved in a number of projects there and was fascinated by the country. I hated it. I hated the heat, the squalor, the crowds, but above all the poverty. I couldn't cope with the beggars: men who solicited sympathy by flaunting open wounds; a child led on a chain to exhibit his penury; another infant on whom flies were settling. In parts of Mumbai crude tents lined the pavements, and in the early morning the concourse of the railway station was virtually taken over by the sleeping bodies of the destitute. We were told (but did not see) that there was one place where prostitutes, some of them children, were kept in cages. We visited a leper colony and were told that not all of the residents had leprosy: some people chose to live there because conditions were better ordered than on the outside. From the roof of a local health centre, as far as the eye could see and in every direction, the land was occupied by rough wooden shacks, home to thousands of the city's slightly better-off masses.

There was also wealth in plenty, but not much of it appeared to 'trickle down'. My impression was that the sheer scale of abject poverty, fuelled by unconfined population growth, was such that very few affluent people, if they cared at all, saw any practical hope of addressing it. Yet I was conscious that it was not so long ago that similar conditions – and similar resigned indifference – existed in the major cities of Britain; that cesspits of fetid degradation were everyday features of the industrial landscape under Queen Victoria, alongside an elite blessed with rank and privilege. Recently, my younger brother had occasion to examine the records of

Liverpool's Toxteth Park Cemetery, searching for the grave of a Confederate agent of the American Civil War. He was shocked to find that then most adult men in the area died in their 40s, and that their most common address was the local workhouse. And, of course, hundreds failed to make it beyond infancy. In my own childhood (which coincided with the Depression of the 1930s), I made my daily way to school from my home in Liverpool 8 through the slums of Windsor Street where ragged children played barefoot. My family was one or two points above this rock-bottom poverty line, but I recall that I was among those who qualified for free school dinners (such as they were during the second world war) and that my parents could not afford to provide me with a school tie.

Beveridge (much assisted by Lord Longford, Alf Morris tells me) changed all that. Despite its imperfections, the welfare state has brought about a state of affairs in which absolute, fundamental destitution is now unusual; instead attention is now focused on the concept of relative poverty. But, as everyone knows, that relativity is growing ever wider. Another Queen, born with and sustained in enormous privilege and able to spend £125,000 on a holiday, reigns over a divided nation. The top hats and finery of Royal Ascot contrast starkly with the hopeless homelessness of our most distressed citizens. And with this increasing social divide we are in danger of seeing a return to the philosophy of Samuel Smiles, with its implication that the poor are to blame for their own condition and that we should rely on our own efforts in life, rather than depend on the help or patronage of others: that the path of virtue demands a dedication to work, service and the acceptance of responsibility; and that conversely idleness leads to ruin. There is no place for scroungers in this ideology. Yet a defect in such thinking is the fact that scrounging, idleness and financial manipulation are by no means confined to the poor. Moreover, it is surely unrealistic to urge welfare to work reform in the midst of a recession, when well-paid work is so scarce.

A recent National Audit Office report highlights the plight of the poor, reflected in a widening gap in life expectancy. Despite the fact that we are generally living longer, the gap in life expectancy between the national average and those 'spearhead' areas with the worst health and deprivation has continued to widen. It is evident that the Labour government's aspirational targets to narrow the gap, set for 2010, will not be met. Indeed the new Coalition is already planning to abandon targets that have no clinical justification. The reasons for this fundamental inequality are complex, but the fact that the lower figures are based on areas of deprivation makes it obvious that socio-economic factors play a major part, reflected in *The Guardian* headline 'Poor in the UK dying 10 years earlier than rich'.

Child poverty is a major sorrow. Nearly four million children are living in poverty in the UK, a higher proportion than in other rich countries. The Labour government had some success in reducing numbers, but failed to meet its targets. Now, while you can find detailed statistics at www.poverty.org.uk, you will be hard put to discover any agreed government policy to address the problem. It does not feature as a subject on the Coalition's 'Programme for Government'. The DWP website on policy in this area is under review and Frank Field (see earlier in this Briefing) is not expected to report until the end of the year. We accept that the problems cannot be solved simply by throwing more money at them, even if this was possible. There is a growing recognition that to alleviate poverty one must find a way to address its many causes. Equally, however, we would argue that poverty should not be made worse by making those reliant on benefits even poorer, and the genuinely vulnerable made to suffer because there is a rash of spongers. While there is general agreement on the need to reduce the national financial deficit, there is widespread concern that this should not be at the expense of those most disadvantaged in our society.

Disabled people are at particular risk. The Disability Alliance points out that they are twice as likely to live in poverty, with a third living below the poverty line across their life course. Currently, 53% of working age disabled adults are not in work. The Alliance says that the budget and previous announcements from the Coalition "have sparked fears over the future of some support and raise the spectre of grinding poverty and increased social isolation for disabled people and their families... These measures together risk a significant assault on support for disabled people who are being hit fastest, hardest and will suffer longest from the impact of the new Government's reaction to the nation's finances."

But poverty is not limited to economic deprivation. There can be poverty of spirit, of ambition, of skills, of

drive and of hope. This is sometimes compounded by the lack of a fundamental foundation of ethical values. We do well to fear the polarisation of a burgeoning underclass which feels put down, mistrusts authority and positively detests the police. We are seeing an inversion of moral values which finds heroic qualities in the behaviour of Raoul Moat and casts him as a hero. Perhaps before we struggle to impose democracy in Afghanistan we should ensure that it finds proper expression in our own country. Let us be blunt in fearing that Liberal Democrats may come to regret compromise in this key area of social justice.

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 and the 'We Hate' series are available on the Forum's website: www.nif.org.uk.