

# national information forum

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

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For members of the National Information Forum*

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## **NEW MINISTERS FOR DISABLED PEOPLE AND SOCIAL CARE**

Jonathan Shaw has taken over from Anne McGuire as Minister for Disabled People, and Phil Hope has replaced Ivan Lewis as Social Care Minister.

## **LAUNCH OF A THIRD SECTOR RESEARCH CENTRE**

A Third Sector Research Centre was inaugurated on 23 October at the University of Birmingham. Funding of £10.25 million over the next five years will come from the Economic and Social Research Council, Office of the Third Sector and The Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Professor Pete Alcock, the Centre's Director, explained that the Centre has been set up to analyse the impact of the sector's activities. It will conduct research and analysis to strengthen the evidence base for the entire third sector, including charities, social enterprises and small community organisations. This will include examining the effectiveness and impact of third sector organisations; mapping of the sector, and an enhanced understanding of its dynamics.



Kevin Brennan, Minister of the Third Sector, commented: “This new research centre is an important part of the Government’s strategy to create the environment for a thriving third sector. Robust evidence is a key to that. The best way to attract financial support is to have clear evidence of the effectiveness of the third sector in changing society for the better. This new centre will help us all to show what works and what is special about the third sector.”

A spokesperson from The Barrow Cadbury Trust expressed particular excitement about a stream of research within the centre that will focus on the role of the third sector in promoting engagement and participation among disadvantaged groups.

For further information, contact: University of Birmingham, Professor Pete Alcock; tel: 0121 414 3171, e.mail P.C.ALCOCK@bham.ac.uk

Office of the Third Sector press contact: Nick Starkey, tel: 020 7276 6012. e.mail: nick.starkey@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk.

**BEN WITTENBERG, DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND RESEARCH AT THE DIRECTORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE, WAS THE SPEAKER AT THE NATIONAL INFORMATION FORUM’S ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ON 28 OCTOBER.**

Ben spoke first about the DSC’s work in publicising funding opportunities. Their vision is ‘an independent voluntary sector at the heart of social change’, with independence absolutely central to the role that charities and other voluntary organisations play in our society.

They believe that a voluntary sector distinct from and independent of the state is vital to the health of society and democracy. The organisations that fall under this broad tent, said Ben, do not exist for individual profit. Nor they do not exist to carry out the will of the state. They arise from communities and are supported by citizens. They exist to serve people and social needs.

Fundamental to the ability of such organisations to achieve change is the ability to access the information they need – whether it be about funding opportunities, developing management skills, campaigning techniques, and so on.

This has been the reason for DSC’s existence for over 30 years – to provide information and support to enable other organisations to be as effective as they can be. It all started with a training course and a book about attracting giving from companies. Later DSC’s flagship publications on funding from trusts and foundations were developed. Now hundreds of titles are published on a wide range of topics.

A few years ago the leap into providing our funding information online was made, starting with the website: [trustfunding.org.uk](http://trustfunding.org.uk).

Just now DSC is working on improving its online information for organisations and individuals involved in social change; connecting them, helping them share information, developing a fabric of data and information that can be shared and used.

But in the current environment there is serious pressure on resources. There is also unprecedented attention from the political class. Both of these pose threats to DSC’s independence – ironically at time when the need to act independently is perhaps more important than ever.

## **Why contracts are killing charities and threatening their independence**

Ben next turned his attention to an alarming trend. He said that DSC had four principles which guided their policy work. One of them is called ‘responsible giving’. In a nutshell this comes from a belief that the best funders get to know applicants and what they need, so they can better help them achieve their goals.

Underpinning this belief, Ben continued, is the view that effective charities are themselves best placed to determine what their beneficiaries need. Charities’ accountability should be first and foremost to those they exist to serve – it should mainly flow downward, not upward. A funder that engages in the right way can help to facilitate this path.

For the most part, government funders don’t engage with charities in the right way, if they engage at all. Their funding criteria is characterised by ever greater controls and regulations, along with non-involvement and lack of interest in what is really being done. The controls are presented as being necessary to achieve ‘value for money’ for the taxpayer or as ‘outcomes for service users’, but in practice they do not do what they say on the tin.

Their real purpose is not to help to maximise benefits for beneficiaries – that would require meaningful involvement in the funding process – or to take advantage of a charity’s expertise and knowledge about what they need. Mostly they are about minimising risk to the bureaucratic and political systems.

They are also in place to ensure the machine is fed the data it wants so that it can ‘prove’ success according to its own self-defined criteria. This objective substitutes for a meaningful understanding of what is being achieved. It is indicative of a comprehensive lack of trust in the charity sector and what it does.

Related to this is the fact that increasingly charities are no longer the recipient of grants (in a pure sense, gifts) but are being transformed into suppliers in a commercial transaction. This shift has crucial implications for their ability to act independently and to serve beneficiaries first and foremost.

This is because a funding contract fundamentally changes who the client is. This is not philosophical fluff but legal fact. In a contract with government the client is the government – not the person receiving the service. That is certainly how the private sector views it.

In a contract, the complex needs of the people receiving the service are usually quantified by a series of actions that must be carried out to satisfy the contract. Despite talk about ‘outcomes’, it is mostly really about ‘outputs’. It’s not about clients’ needs as human beings in the round anymore. They’re no longer the beneficiaries of charity, but they’re not customers either. The service user has become part of a commercial transaction – effectively a widget that is processed for financial remuneration.

Government may claim to be acting on behalf of service users or taxpayers, but this assumes that they know what service users actually need, and that they have a grasp of what true ‘value for money’ really is (both highly debatable).

Better understanding of these devastating changes is impeded by fuzzy terminology. Government spin conflates any type of financial support as ‘funding’, as if a contract awarded to deliver a service was somehow still a ‘gift’ from a beneficent government rather than payment for services rendered.

This translates into a lack of clarity in actual practice, where we find grants that look feel and smell like contracts and vice-versa. Commissioners try to ‘look behind the price’ at our costs when delivering under contract – an absurd transferring of grant practice to a contractual relationship that private companies would not put up with.

Bizarrely, ministers seem to have got the right rhetoric – we are told that the private sector has a crucial role to play in advocating for people and campaigning on important policy issues. We are told that we can really help them to ‘get it right’ for everybody.

Government, we hear, wants charities to participate in the design of the services that it funds, to take advantage of the connection with their beneficiaries and volunteers, and their outreach into communities. This, we are told, is ‘intelligent commissioning’. But the government’s ideal of ‘commissioning’ – whereby government selects from a so-called ‘level playing field’ of potential service providers to get the best service for the end user – simply does not exist in practice. Despite any initial good intentions, the reality of the implementation has been ham-fisted and chaotic.

In reality, commissioning basically means procurement. The initial processes have been designed along the lines of getting the cheapest building contractor to fix holes in the road. They have been crudely transplanted to address complex social problems and human needs.

And when the rhetoric comes up against the nuts and bolts of how charities are actually treated by government, especially in the procurement process, it starts to look pretty cheap. This leaves them feeling disillusioned, cynical and even abused. The majority of the sector that isn’t being paid for its support and loyalty to the existing regime is rapidly losing faith.

Stalin once described bringing socialism to Poland as like ‘putting a saddle on a cow’. He meant that the socialist system that the Soviets pretty much imposed on Poland just didn’t suit the country and as a result didn’t work (of course, most would argue that it didn’t work for Russia either, but that’s neither here nor there!).

Ben left the political analogy up to his audience, but he was clear that charities are being saddled and that the saddle doesn’t fit. More importantly, it doesn’t suit the people that charities are trying to help. It is a blunt and crude instrument that is being inflicted on the sector that was designed for completely different purposes. It bears no resemblance to the ideal of ‘responsible giving’. The system is fundamentally unfriendly to voluntary organisations. It refuses to recognise that charities cannot help people if their hands are tied with absurd red tape and pointless paperwork. Fundamentally, the bureaucracy simply does not trust charities to know what’s best for their beneficiaries. It tells them what is best and then gives them the dubious choice of going along with that or opting out.

Increasingly, and despite massive expenditure, it seems that partnership with government is becoming more, not less, difficult. Charities face a difficult choice – do they just refuse government funding and all of the complications and compromises it entails to preserve our independence? What if that means losing the ability to influence policy makers? What if it means losing out on funding that could really help their beneficiaries?

On the other hand, if they accept funding on the government’s terms what will that do to their freedom of action? What if in five or ten years time they wake up to find that the thousand little compromises have led them in a direction in which they didn’t want to go – away from what their beneficiaries want and need?

These are not easy questions, Ben concluded, and there will be different debates and different answers for different organisations. But those of us in the private sector need to be asking them of ourselves.

**DSC can help your fundraising in a number of ways: through conferences, a website ‘[trustfunding.org.uk](http://trustfunding.org.uk)’, training courses and 64 books covering every aspect of your fundraising needs. Please visit [www.dsc.org.uk](http://www.dsc.org.uk) for full details.**

## **SOCIAL CARE BULLETIN**

Do you all know about the Department of Health’s Social Care Bulletin? The November 2008 issue (no.8) covers:

1. People welcome the power of individual budgets
2. Effective prevention
3. Voicepiece
4. Sharing the vision – shaping the future
5. Putting People First – turning a vision into a reality
6. New posts to push local transformation
7. The missing link: Lynne Dean, Deputy Regional Director for the South West
8. Improving the lives of people with learning disabilities
9. Meet Anne Williams - the new National Director for Learning Disabilities
10. Early intervention is key to cost-effective care
11. Putting patient dignity at the heart of care
12. Case study: Beating a dignified path
13. The future of care and support – have you had your say?
14. Time to take a stand against mental health discrimination
15. Safeguarding: how can we stamp out abuse?
16. Local area agreements: settling unfinished business
17. News in brief

To subscribe to the bulletin, email [socialcarebulletinsubscription@dh.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:socialcarebulletinsubscription@dh.gsi.gov.uk) including your name, job title, organisation, full postal address and telephone number.

## **ON THE SUBJECT OF RELIGION**

(from an unidentified source)

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said “Stop! Don’t do it!”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he said.

I said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!”

“Like what?”

“Well ... are you religious or atheist?”

“Religious.”

“Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?”

“Christian.”

“Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Protestant.”

“Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

“Baptist.”

“Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

“Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!”

To which I said, “Die, heretic scum!” and pushed him off.

## **HEALTH INFORMATION**

NHS Choices and NHS Direct have combined to provide a single online resource at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) for health information and services.

*(Social Care Bulletin, issue 8)*

## **KEEP WARM KEEP WELL**

The COI for the Department of Health has published new editions of this guide. There are A5 versions for people aged over 60, people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and families, and an A4 easy read edition. All offer advice on financial help, how to save energy (and money) and staying well and healthy. All good stuff, but we are perplexed as to why Energy Watch has been subsumed within a wider consumer remit and why, oil prices having fallen dramatically, so little pressure is being put on energy suppliers to rescind the huge price increases they introduced earlier this year.

Copies of the booklets can be obtained via [www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk), quoting 289401/Keep warm, keep well, or by writing to DH Publications Orderline, PO Box 777, London SE1 6XH; tel: 0300 123 1002; e.mail: [dh@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dh@prolog.uk.com).

## **CHOOSING A CAR: A GUIDE FOR OLDER AND DISABLED PEOPLE**

May we remind members of this excellent guide from Ricability. Apart from the ordinary considerations that any purchaser will want to take into account, this free booklet offers advice on what to look out for if you have a disability or are just getting older. There is a section on financing purchase if you are disabled, adaptations and equipment that can help (including devices for wheelchair users), and where you can get further information.

Available from Ricability, 30 Angel Gate, City Road, London EC1V 2PT; tel: 020 7427 2460; e.mail: [mail@ricability.org.uk](mailto:mail@ricability.org.uk); website; [www.ricability.org.uk](http://www.ricability.org.uk).

## **A NEW STUDY FINDS THAT OLDER PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES COMMONLY PUT UP WITH UNCORRECTED SIGHT LOSS**

Research commissioned by the Thomas Pocklington Trust, a sight loss charity, focused on people over 65, and highlighted the problem of older people on low incomes failing to go for eye tests. One of the authors of the report, Professor Bruce Evans of the Institute of Optometry, said that the research confirmed a high level of correctable visual loss among older people that indicated a need for methods that encourage them to seek eye care.

It was found that almost a third of the optical practices studied (in South London) did not provide spectacles whose cost was fully covered by NHS optical vouchers. [We infer that people may be deterred from tests because of the cost of the spectacles they need.] The researchers suggest that the value of these vouchers should be raised and that NHS eye care should be adequately funded as it is in Scotland.

The research also examined the effect of two new methods of eye testing that could be performed in people's homes or community settings. It is not suggested that these should replace the need for regular professional eye care, merely that they could stimulate people to seek the vital care they need.

The report, *Improving the detection of correctable low vision in older people*, can be seen at [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk).

(NB: *The sight loss and eye health magazine (RNIB)*, issue 35, November 2008).

## **NEW RIGHTS FOR DISABLED AIR PASSENGERS**

European Regulation 1107/2006 came into force in July. It applies to all member states, which should supervise and ensure compliance with the regulation and designate an appropriate enforcement body.

The regulation establishes the rights of both disabled people and anyone with reduced mobility when travelling by air. The definition of those covered is very wide. It includes anybody whose mobility when using transport is reduced due to any physical disability (sensory or locomotor, permanent or temporary), intellectual disability or impairment, or any other cause of disability, or age, and whose situation needs appropriate attention and the adaptation to his or her particular needs of the service available to all passengers.

The thinking behind the regulation is that those people within the definition should have opportunities for air travel comparable to those of other citizens. To achieve this, assistance to meet their particular needs should be provided at the airport as well as on board aircraft and should not be the subject of an additional charge. Moreover, all essential information provided to air passengers, including information relating to safety, should be provided in alternative, accessible formats and at least in the same languages as that made available to other passengers.

However, there are important derogations in Article 4. These allow that in some circumstances it may be required that the person concerned should be accompanied by another person who can provide required assistance. And, while it is now normally unlawful to refuse to carry passengers because of their disability or reduced mobility, this can be set aside if such carriage would conflict with international, national or community safety regulations, or safety requirements laid down by the authority that issued the air operator's certificate, or if the size of the aircraft or its doors makes embarkation or carriage physically impossible. In the latter case reasonable efforts must be made to suggest an acceptable alternative.

Note: This is not, of course, an exact statement of a lengthy and detailed regulation, but is intended to provide an introduction to an important European development, which will now lie alongside our own disability discrimination legislation.

## **WE HATE NO.14: ROAD CASUALTIES**

Well doesn't everyone? The problem, rather, is that we accept them too casually. If you listen to radio traffic reports you will hear, every day, about a succession of "accidents", the focus being on the adverse impact on road availability rather than on the people who have been hurt: unless, of course, the RTA is exceptionally grievous. The problems are so endemic that we tend to take them for granted as inevitable: as a cost for the convenience of motoring.

### **But aren't things improving?**

You may well say that things are getting better. Road deaths have fallen below 3,000 (per annum) for the first time since 1926 and there is a sharp fall in serious injuries (down 37% since 1994/8). The figures for children are conspicuously better than even these averages. Only motorcyclists buck the trend, with deaths up by 26% since 1994/8. But there is no room for complacency. The slaughter on our road network remains scandalously high and the statistics say nothing of the suffering endured by the relatives of the casualties. To speak of improvement is like comparing the death toll in the second and first world wars. In London more people are killed on the roads than are murdered.

A significant proportion of deaths result from dangerous driving, and tougher penalties are surely needed. Proposals for a six-point penalty for "excessive speeding" (20 mph or more over the legal limit), and confiscation of licence after two such offences, are welcome. Likewise the new charge of causing death by careless driving will mean greater accountability as it will be the consequence of the carelessness that is, at last, recognised and addressed by the courts. Consideration is also being given to lowering the drink-drive limit and introducing a drug-drive limit. Offences of driving under the influence of drugs are currently difficult to prove, but are thought to account for around 20% of all road deaths.

But the sins of hard-core offenders are only part of the story. Many collisions – perhaps most of them – arise just from poor driving, inattention, fatigue, mistakes, miscalculations and a failure to allow enough room for error that afflict even those normally well disposed to respect road safety.

You can't completely take the danger out of driving. George Colman put it in the 18th century that "accidents will happen". It is sadly true that some people, as the American author Don Marquis reminded us, are so unlucky that they run into accidents that started out to happen to somebody else. But as Hotspur remarks in Henry IV, part 1, while all manner of things are dangerous – "to take a cold, to sleep, to drink", yet "out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety". Let that be our watchword. There will always be a pressing need to drive responsibly and with caution; to avoid taking risks: I am tempted to say conservatively, but that would never do. An even better way to reduce accidents is to leave the car in the garage.

### **It's the poor what suffer most**

The National Information Forum's focus is on underprivileged people. It is therefore relevant to draw attention to the European Federation of Road Traffic Victims' theme for 2008: that "we are all vulnerable..., but some are more vulnerable than others". The recent report, Road Casualties Great Britain, mentions that poor people are four times more likely to die in a crash than are the wealthy. It is even worse in London, where research has shown that a child from the lowest income group is over 20 times more likely to be killed while walking than a child from the wealthiest group.

### **RoadPeace**

One charity that has consistently pressed the case for a fairer and safer system whereby the threat of road death and injury is reduced is RoadPeace. It campaigns for justice for road victims, demanding that death and injury should no longer be regarded as minor traffic offences; that the treatment in law for all motorists who kill or injure through negligent driving should be treated in the same way as other cases where death or injury is caused through equivalent negligence. It follows that death or injury should be explicit in the charge and that cases should be heard by a judge and jury, not by lay magistrates, and that the level of culpability should be reflected in the sentence.

But RoadPeace also provides direct support for bereaved and injured people through a national helpline (0845 4500 355) and provides specialist advice and escorts to courts and inquests. Its most recent newsletter (No.26, Autumn 2008) provides far more information than is possible here.

RoadPeace has recently relocated to Brixton in South London. It can now be contacted at: G4b Shakespeare Business Centre, 245a Coldharbour Lane, London SW9 8RR, tel: 020 7733 1603; e.mail: [info@roadpeace.org](mailto:info@roadpeace.org); website: [www.roadpeace.org](http://www.roadpeace.org). We are particularly delighted that this vigorous charity is one of five winners of this year's Guardian charity awards. As the Society Guardian's website points out, the awards recognise and nurture innovation and excellence among smaller charities, which typically have the fresh thinking, flexibility and reach into communities that make the crucial difference to people's lives.

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