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A Digest of Current Social Information

News Briefing No. 67. March 2014

• ATTACK ON WELFARE BENEFITS

THE ATTACK ON WELFARE BENEFITS

During February, my time has been taken up in preparing and documenting Ann's memorial celebration. I have passed over the campaign against female genital mutilation; the immigration controversy; the furore over 'no plans to prosecute' letters in the context of the peace process in Northern Ireland; the welcome postponement of the national NHS database; the ineffective and inhumane badger cull, and the continuing high incidence of domestic violence, largely against women. But I felt that I should not simply ignore The Guardian's coverage of the erosion of welfare benefits, now driving more and more people into destitution. In the last few years I have frequently referred to this emotive subject. The main strands of my analysis, simply put, are that:

- welfare reform, based on getting people off state benefits and into work, which began under Labour, has intensified to an unacceptable level under the coalition
- it is valid to encourage and help people into work but not to coerce
- a necessary element of any such policy is the prior availability of suitable jobs.

During the month *The Guardian* reported:

1st: An ONS study has found that real wages have fallen consistently since 2010. A leader, 'Not in it together', makes the point that lower-income groups will fare much worse over the post-recession period, mainly because of welfare cuts, and that despite some recovery poverty is now set to deepen.

5th: Zita Holbourne asserts that the government's austerity policies disproportionately affect people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, something that has been conspicuously missing from public discussion.

12th: Bedroom tax blamed for a surge in rent arrears, affecting two thirds of English households subject to the tax.

Cuts in local authority funding threaten the future of homeless and housing support services.

A campaign, Who Benefits?, allows people on state benefits to tell real stories that show their need for support (in contrast to the message of



Benefits Street).

15th: Catholic Archbishop Vincent Nichols (later made a cardinal) denounces some aspects of government welfare reforms as “a disgrace”. He claims that the basic safety net has been “torn apart” and that he has been told that the administration of social assistance “has become more punitive.”

18th: The government is said to be keen to terminate its contract with Atos, but only in 2015 when the current agreement expires. Overall, more than 600,000 appeals have been lodged against decisions based on Atos findings, at a cost of £60 million a year. In 40 per cent of cases the tribunals have found in favour of the claimant.

19th: The charities Drugscope and Homeless Link have told an official inquiry that jobseekers are living in “a culture of fear” of doing or saying the wrong thing, with unreasonable demands placed upon them.

In an important article, Zoe Williams contends that it is the cumulative impact of benefit cuts that is shocking.

20th: In an open letter to the Daily Mail, 27 Protestant bishops assert that “over half of the people using food banks have been put in that situation by cutbacks and failures in the benefits system, whether it be payment delays or punitive sanctions.”

The DWP has published figures showing 897,690 sanctions against claimants of JSA and ESA in the year to September 2013.

The RNIB is considering court action against the DWP for failing to send benefit letters in accessible formats.

21st: A leaked DWP proposal suggests charging claimants who appeal against adverse benefit decisions.

A review by a University of Warwick team, commissioned by the government, finds that people turn to charity food banks as a last resort.

A leading article notices that in the six months between April and September 2013 the Trussell Trust provided more food parcels than in the whole of 2012. In the past year, over 5,000 people were treated for malnutrition.

22nd: Challenges made by disabled people against the ‘bedroom tax’ and the cap on benefits were rejected by the Court of Appeal.

Atos reveals that it has been in discussion with the DWP for several months in a bid to end its work capability assessment contracts.

Canon Giles Fraser argues that the church is right to be angry about government attacks on the poor and their demonization.

26th: Lord Bach points out that it is no longer possible to get legal advice on welfare benefits through legal aid.

A Guardian survey finds nearly three quarters of respondents are gloomy over the future of people in old age.

Patrick Butler describes the government’s moral arguments on welfare reform as “threadbare”.

A service provided by Oxfordshire Mind has a success rate of 98 per cent in supporting appeals against 'fit for work' rulings!!!! One successful clamant says "Every single negotiation with the DWP is saturated with the most mind-bending anxiety because they treat you like a criminal from the word-go".

27th: The National Audit Office is critical of delays in processing Personal Independence Payments cases and the expensive costs of administration.

Derek Kinrade