

# 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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## WELFARE REFORM

We sometimes feel that a point is reached when further comment on an issue is futile. There is a momentum in the publication of Green and White Papers that seems unstoppable, no matter how ill-conceived the proposals. On welfare reform most mainstream charities seem to have confined themselves to straight reporting, and there is, of course, a widespread feeling that 'something needs to be done'. There is a sense that alongside meeting genuine social welfare needs the availability of benefits has created a culture of dependency and a subversion of aspiration.

Nevertheless, we take some small satisfaction that the kind of criticism that we have voiced in the last two issues of this Briefing have belatedly found parallel expression in the mainstream media. These included some trenchant comments in the BBC's *Question Time* on 11 December and a number of passionate letters in *The Guardian* of 12 December. Left-leaning MPs and grassroots Labour members were said by Cllr Susan Press to be "profoundly appalled at these proposals". Geoffrey Smith, who spent 32 years as a Labour councillor, expressed himself as "ashamed of New Labour". He was aghast at the demonising of people on benefits in contradistinction to the failure to address the greed and abuses of "City fat cats". Dr Michelle Bird, from Devizes, felt that the government "have it in for single mums", whereas in fact "no job of work is so important as being a mother". Finally, David Lund, from Winscombe, asked: "As the depression deepens, how soon will it be before Purnell reintroduces the workhouse?"

The government's White Paper is titled *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future*. It may not be entirely clear that the "expectations" are those of the government: essentially that almost everyone on benefits should be preparing for, or looking for, work. The Green Paper proposals have been tempered somewhat, but their tone remains basically punitive. They recall the Royal Commission enquiry set up in 1832, the primary concern of which was to reduce expenditure. Its report of 1834 questioned the merits of providing 'outdoor relief' to those who were fit enough to work, concluding that such relief was morally destructive. And, of course, workhouses were indeed the logical consequence.

Our objections remain twofold: that the proposals attempt too much and at the worst possible time. Perhaps we need not worry. As one member of the audience remarked on *Question Time*, this government is very good at talking tough, but nothing ever happens. But even if that is true, the cost – at



a time of severe financial pressure on government expenditure – will be huge.

## **SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Kevin Brennan, Minister for the Third Sector and for social exclusion, was refreshingly honest in a speech to the National Children and Adults Services Conference in Liverpool on 23 October 2008, when he looked at performance against the Socially Excluded Adults Public Service Agreement (PSA16). The agreement commits the government – with third sector partners – radically to improve the life chances of socially excluded adults. It does not relate to every socially excluded group, but does cover four of those most vulnerable in our society. The facts, as the Minister pointed out, speak for themselves:

- only one in 10 adults with a learning disability is in employment
- the same proportion of adults with more serious mental health problems is in work
- nearly one in four prisoners leaves custody without a clear address
- 13% of care leavers are homeless at the age of 19
- Around 40% of rough sleepers in London in 2005 had been in prison
- 30 to 50% of people misusing drugs also have mental health problems.

“Helping these vulnerable groups to gain the core foundations of a home and a job,” commented the Minister, “can be a big step forward that can help them to get their lives back on track.”

A deeper analysis of the overall situation is contained in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s tenth review, *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2008*. This is built around a set of indicators based on government data and looks at the record across a wide range of subjects from low income to exclusion from services. It captures a picture of the state of poverty and social exclusion in the UK, just before the onset of the current economic downturn.

The research finds that there has been a measure of improvement in some areas, but that in others progress has either stalled or worsened. The authors conclude that what stands out is the difference in the record in the five-year period from 1997 and subsequently. In the first five-year period, 30 out of the 56 statistics monitored improved, with seven getting worse; thereafter, as far as data is yet available, only 14 improved, while 15 worsened and the remainder remained steady. The overall impression is one of early momentum not being sustained.

The JRF *Findings* summary provides an easy-to-read table in the various subject areas showing for each ‘improved’, ‘steady’ or ‘worsened’ over the first and second five-year periods.

Kevin Brennan’s speech is on the Cabinet Office website, [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk).

The full JRF report by Guy Palmer, Tom MacInnes and Peter Kenway, is at [www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/ebooks/2315-society-poverty-exclusion.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/ebooks/2315-society-poverty-exclusion.pdf).

The *Findings* version is at [www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2338.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/2338.asp).

## **THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

In News Briefing no.6 we featured the concern of the Directory of Social Change at the increasing trend for government funding to be dispensed under contract to carry our government objectives. It is interesting, therefore, to find that co-incidentally the website of the Centre for Social Justice says: “The war on poverty will only be won by liberating the third sector from the incessant pressure to do the Government’s work in the Government’s way. Innovative social entrepreneurs and grass roots projects need to be trusted and equipped to find new solutions to these intractable problems. It can be done.” We think that the whole of this site will be of interest to our members, not least the views about failed asylum seekers. Go to [www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk).

## **DEBT ADVICE SERVICES HELP THOUSANDS**

Face-to-face debt advice services, funded by the government, have assisted more than 100,000 people in 2008, while there has also been a significantly increased demand for support provided by the national telephone debt advice line, the National Debtline. Calls have increased by 40% since 2007, sought by an estimated 100,000 financially excluded clients in debt. Demand for Business Debtline, specifically for businesses, has also doubled from autumn 2007 to autumn 2008. In the recent pre budget report, the government announced that an additional £5.85m would be allocated to the National Debtline advisory service to boost its capacity to cope with the additional demand.

From Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion – e.briefing

## **VULNERABLE CARE HOME RESIDENTS LET DOWN BY ‘MISERLY’ PERSONAL ALLOWANCE INCREASE**

Age Concern has condemned a ‘miserly’ weekly 75p addition to the personal expenses allowance (PEA) to the 240,000 poorest care homes residents in 2009. The charity claims government ministers have betrayed vulnerable care home residents as ministers had previously promised to hold a public consultation over the amount in 2008, but failed to do so.

Under a means-tested public care system, people who cannot afford to pay for their care need to give up any remaining income towards it, leaving them with £21.15 to live on each week, now set to rise to £21.90 from April 2009. Over 1,500 people have voiced their fears to Age Concern about why the 75p increase is not sufficient to purchase everyday essentials, which for many means they need to ask relatives for help. Age Concern is now calling for Minister for Social Care, Phil Hope, to honour the promise to consult, and to increase PEA to £40 a week.

From Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion – e.briefing

## **THE FUNDERS’ ALMANAC 2008**

The Directory of Social Change has launched a new publication intended to provide sophisticated insight for funders and fund raisers into the giving of grant-making trusts, companies and central government. It includes analysis of the geographical distribution of grants and cash donations throughout the UK, the types of beneficiaries and causes receiving support and the funding provided by a range of programmes from government. As such it provides a guide into patterns of funding, but is admitted to be only a first step in the gathering of relevant data.

One of the key objectives of the research is to help funders to understand the environment in which they and the recipients of their funding operate and to be able to respond effectively to change. It is rooted in a belief that the objectives and agendas of funders should be built around the needs of end users, not the other way round, and that funders have an obligation to ensure that the setting of grant programmes, funding criteria and objectives reflects the needs of those they support.

As Ben Wittenberg, one of the authors of the Almanac, said at the Forum’s AGM (see News Briefing no.6), major shifts in statutory funding in recent years have confused the picture of how much money is going where and for what purposes. In the Almanac he explains that central government has largely been pulling away from funding local activity and is increasingly focusing on national projects and organisations, often under contract [a trend exemplified by the intended farming out of work related to welfare reform].

The intention with *The Funders’ Almanac* is to develop a solid evidence base that will not only add to the broader understanding of how funding to the voluntary sector is changing, but will also serve to inform funders about the wider environment in which they are operating, and drive debate about

the future of funding at a strategic level.

Available from DSC, 24 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2DP; tel: 0845 077 7707; e.mail: publications@dsc.org.uk; website: www.dsc.org.uk, price £50.

### **ENCOURAGING THE TAKE-UP OF TAX CREDITS**

H.M.Revenue & Customs, the government department charged with responsibility for the administration of tax credits, acknowledges that “hundreds of people living in disadvantaged areas don’t claim money they’re entitled to”. One initiative to address this problem has been undertaken by HMRC Birmingham, by taking information out of revenue offices and into supermarkets, neighbourhood offices and children’s centres. HMRC’s staff magazine, *Pulse*, explains that the aim has been to talk to customers in disadvantaged locations, particularly where levels of child poverty are high. Many such people live in poor conditions, earn low wages and have little access to training and education. In a preliminary survey, HMRC’s research team discovered around 400 families in Birmingham’s most disadvantaged areas who should have been claiming money but weren’t doing so.

During a four-day event, HMRC staff spoke to 1,336 “customers”, some of whom were surprised that a department notorious for extracting tax, should want to give money away. The event led to 44 new Child and Working Tax Credit claims and 10 Child Benefit claims.

The next step is to look more closely at the results, before deciding whether to roll out similar events across the country. We would like to know the outcome. Equally, though *Pulse* does not say so, front line charities may need to consider extending their own outreach work.

*Pulse*, issue 11, December 2008.

### **CREDIT REPAIR**

The Office of Fair Trading has asked us to publicise the following press release in order to help raise awareness of new protection that is available to consumers who may be thinking of paying for credit information services:

“Consumers should be wary of any business claiming to be able to improve consumers’ credit ratings. Entries in a credit record, including county court judgements or Scottish decrees, can only be altered or removed if they are factually incorrect or have been discharged.

“Under UK legislation, consumers can access their own credit files from credit reference agencies, to check for themselves whether the information held is correct or needs updating. It costs just £2. Details of how to go about doing this are contained in published guidance, *Credit Explained*, available from the Information Commissioner’s Office (www.ico.gov.uk; telephone 08456 30 60 60).

“However, consumers who are thinking of paying for such services will have greater protection under new OFT licensing requirements which came into force on 1 October 2008.

“The changes mean that any business wishing to provide ‘credit repair’ services will need to hold an appropriate consumer credit licence. In order to be considered fit to hold such a licence, the company will need to be able to demonstrate that it is not engaged in any unfair practices such as making misleading claims to consumers about the services it can provide, either in advertisements or via its website.

“For clear, practical consumer advice call 08454 04 05 06 or visit [www.consumerdirect.gov.uk](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk).”

### **TAKING ACCOUNT OF PUBLIC OPINION**

Arthritis News reports that, from October, health trusts and strategic health authorities will be required to say how the views of the public have helped to shape their decisions about what services to commission. This will extend to how complaints were handled and the result of public consultations. Although since 2003 the NHS has had a general duty to involve the public in decisions, Arthritis News believes that the new provisions will put more pressure on the NHS to prove that it has taken account of public opinion.

But we wonder how this will play out in practice. It is easily said, but extraordinarily difficult to achieve in the real world. Just how can the great mass of the public be involved? Focus groups tend to bring together only those with strong views and, perhaps, personal agendas. In our own local hospital there is a rule that the governors will establish channels of communication with their membership community, and consult with them on key issues. But how they can be expected to do this is unclear and the extent to which they are able to do so is doubtful. Although open to the public, attendance at governors' meetings is minimal. And what if 'public opinion', even to the extent that it can be divined and achieves consensus, conflicts with what the administrators want to do? We fear that in the government's ethos there is a grave danger of tokenism. But we would be interested in your views.

### **RICABILITY: A NEW WEBSITE**

A new website has been set up for disabled people to post and read reviews of products. It is run by the charity Ricability, which evaluates products and services for older and disabled people. For people without internet access, Ricability can provide a review by audiotape, Braille, phone or email. Telephone 0161 477 0765 or visit [www.product-reviews.org.uk](http://www.product-reviews.org.uk).

From: *Arthritis News*, Feb/March 2009.

### **THE IMPROVED BLUE BADGE MAP**

In case anyone with access to the internet doesn't know about Directgov's blue badge map, it's worth a look at [www.direct.gov.uk/bluebadgemap](http://www.direct.gov.uk/bluebadgemap). This is a truly amazing resource that can be used to find:

- Blue badge parking bays in over 100 UK towns and cities
- Red route parking bays in London
- Petrol stations and their service facilities on major routes in the UK
- Accessible public toilets in over 100 UK towns and cities
- Railway stations and their accessibility
- London underground stations and their accessibility
- Taxi ranks
- Shopmobility centres
- Accessible beaches
- Wheelyboat locations
- Mobility centres
- Interesting locations
- Parking rules for all UK Councils.

The site gives clear guidance for its use.

### **SHELTER'S HOUSING ADVICE BOOKLETS**

These guides, which cost only 55 pence each (including postage and packing), give practical,

action-focused information and advice for people in England and Wales who are facing housing problems. The titles are as follows:

- Private tenancies: paying a deposit
- Gas and fire safety
- Getting repairs done
- Council tenancies
- Relationship breakdown
- Asylum seekers and refugees
- Finding a place to live
- Housing association tenancies
- Housing Benefit and Local Housing Allowance
- Rent arrears
- Know your rights
- Homeless? Read this
- Mortgage arrears
- Private tenancies
- Harassment and illegal eviction

There are discounts for bulk orders. All orders to: Sales and Marketing, Shelter, 88 Old Street, London EC1V 9HU; tel: 0844 515 2036; fax: 0844 515 2167; e.mail: [publications@shelter.org.uk](mailto:publications@shelter.org.uk).

## **WE HATE NO.15: HONOURS**

Derek Kinrade

Just a minute, I think I hear you say, aren't honours a good thing if they reward genuine outstanding achievement: going the extra mile, working beyond the call of duty? Do they not encourage service for the benefit of others? These are powerful arguments. But some way short of the whole truth.

Let us first consider the shortcomings in the selection process: the alleged recognition of those who make substantial political donations, the preferment that is said to be based on seniority in the Civil Service and the armed forces, the private vendettas that deny worthy candidates essential support. And the surprising absence from the lists of people conspicuously meriting honour. There is too a suspicion, across the board, of a class-based hierarchy of awards. But the procedures are secretive and awards are conferred or withheld without explanation and are therefore not open to challenge.

There is yet another more subtle objection: a danger that honours may – in some recipients – induce a certain sense of superiority, a touch of inflated ego. Those who are honoured or ennobled are rendered, as it were, honourable or noble. Arrigo Boito, borrowing from Shakespeare, recognised the perils of self-satisfaction at being awarded an honour in the famous first act monologue of Falstaff in Verdi's opera of that name: "flattery falsely inflates it, pride corrupts it, slanders taint it: as for me, I want none of it!"

In line with this, over the years, there have been a significant number of 'refuseniks' – people of principle who, for whatever reason, have turned down the offer of an honour. It must not be assumed that this is necessarily an expression of republican sentiment. John Evelyn, an ardent royalist, was said to have been (like his father) "a studious decliner of honours and titles" He declined the Order of the Bath and "often refused" a knighthood. But in some cases the reasons for refusal may well be the association with monarchy. Joan Smith is surely not the only one to have rejected an honour for this reason. For inherent in the ceremony associated with the award of honours, is a feudal relationship between the monarch and the subject. Honours are conferred by a 'sovereign', to whom deference is expressed through bowing or curtsying; and, of course,

walking backwards. Thus, while awardees are dutifully thankful, their inferior position is publicly proclaimed, and the monarch's status and authority in the feudal system are publicly reinforced. Thomas Paine, no friend of monarchy, was typically forthright: "When I reflect on the pompous titles bestowed on unworthy men, I feel an indignity that instructs me to despise the absurdity."

There is in the whole show (for that is what it is) a deeply-rooted antiquity, expressed in formal ritual. Some would call it tradition; I regard it as an anachronism that has more in common with a 19th century operetta than a modern democratic society. Even the titles of the honours are outdated, including Orders of the Garter, Thistle, Bath, St Michael and St George, a Royal Victorian Order and awards related to a vanished empire, the latter word one that has recently been culled from the Oxford Junior Dictionary. I find it disconcerting when an old, down-to-earth friend becomes a baroness or a lord, or an illustrious star becomes a dame, with – at best – inevitable pantomime associations.

Thankfully the media is catching up. A leader in *The Guardian* (31 December) refers to a "baffling hierarchy between the awards" and "the system's class-bound origins". It ventured: "Some will conclude that honours are adult Blue Peter badges that real grown-ups should learn to live without", and ended: "The objections arise because of the system's insistence on pulling rank." On the same day, *The Independent* provided an illuminating summary of the chequered history of the honours system, reinforcing the view that, despite attempts to recognise the claims of ordinary achievers, they remain for the most part obstinately elitist. Surely it is time to reform, modernise and democratise the whole business.

1 Lionel Salter's translation

2 Diary, introduction

3 'Reflections on Titles' in *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, May 1775, quoted in John Keane, *Tom Paine: a political life*.

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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.