

NATIONAL INFORMATION FORUM

www.nif.org.uk



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

To all members of the National Information Forum

MEMBERS' INFORMATION SHEET NO.3

We Believe

That to allow exemptions to equality is a contradiction in terms.

Working together

Please earmark 28 October in your diaries. We are organising a sandwich and wine lunch at Brown's Courtrooms, Covent Garden to give members an opportunity to meet, network and discuss issues of common concern, along with a brief AGM. Separate invitations will follow shortly.

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

CULTIVATIONS: BREAKING NEW GROUND

Richard Woollatt, CEO of Cultivations, e.mailed us on 22 July to ask if it would be helpful to other members of the Forum to hear a little about what they do and that perhaps they could reciprocate. "The more information we exchange or become aware of," he wrote, "will help to change lives".

We think this is a great idea and hope that our information sheets can be one means of networking. We would therefore welcome similar contributions.

"**Cultivations** is a charity working in the field of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture.

"As an organisation, it concentrates on promoting, advising and informing people about the therapeutic and educational benefits of working with nature. Engaging with nature in all its forms can be extremely effective.

"Cultivations uses the strap-line "Breaking New Ground" to illustrate how innovative and widely beneficial Horticultural Therapy can be in the modern world, although the concept of **Nature, Time and Patience** depicting the 'Three Great Physicians' is not a new one.

"Cultivations encourages people to become involved in ANY form of horticultural, environmental or conservation activity to help enhance, improve and increase their sense of personal awareness, health and well-being. A diverse range of organisations recently attended focus meetings across Wales to discuss such complex issues such as well-being, work, isolation and self-esteem, all

relating to Therapeutic Horticulture. Similar Focus Meetings and workshops are currently being planned for 2009.

“In North Wales, Making Tracks, a project managed by Cultivations, is proving to be both fun and rewarding for all concerned. The hands-on work at grass-roots community level effectively reduces re-offending and helps to address incidents of anti-social behaviour. Making Tracks attendees participate in gardening and environmental activities and are also supported by volunteers and mentors from their community.

“The practical work undertaken has included clearing paths in woodland, pond reclamation, willow structure maintenance, community gardening for local parks and charities, and dry stone walling. It is hoped that this scheme can be developed in other regions.

“The West Midland Network Flower Show was established in 2002 by a number of dedicated Social and Therapeutic Horticultural Practitioners. The aim was to provide an opportunity for the many less-abled, disadvantaged or older members of the community to prepare for and participate in a really fun activity. It has now become a wonderful social occasion for all, and encourages people to meet others and demonstrate their gardening, horticultural or related skills.

“The Grow to Show ethos for this event is an established part of many projects' yearly plan of activities. Currently, over 30 projects participate in this annual event. Everyone taking part receives a certificate, and medals are presented for the top three exhibits in each category. There is great competition for the Best in Show award, although involvement and achievement for each individual is of prime importance.

“A vital part of the work undertaken by Cultivations is to highlight the fruitful application of Social and Therapeutic Horticulture in all its various forms. Workshops and presentations are ongoing throughout the year, and the networking at these events proves to be both popular and effective for sharing best practice and ideas. Training at all levels is encouraged, and Cultivations has assisted in the validation of the first Bsc Hons Degree in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture at Writtle College, Essex.

“For further information please contact E: info@cultivations.co.uk or visit www.cultivations.co.uk”.

Geraldine Woollatt
Cultivations Trustee
12 August 2008

May I (Derek) add that a fascinating new book, *The Brother Gardeners* by Andrea Wulf, charts what she calls “The Birth of an Obsession”: the expansion of plant species in Britain to include many varieties from overseas, and the development of our passion for gardening beyond the formal landscapes of the aristocracy. A process, you may be surprised to learn, in which our home ground of Peckham was pivotal.

C4EO

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has launched a ‘Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children’s and Young People’s Services’ (C4EO). This is a consortium led by the National Children’s Bureau, the National Foundation for Educational Research, Research in Practice, the Social Care Institute for Excellence, the National Youth Agency and a number of other key organisations. We understand that over the next three years the Centre will receive £12 million

to bring together, analyse and provide information about national, regional and local knowledge as to what works in tackling issues such as improving the welfare of looked-after and disabled children.

We trust that the needs of care leavers will not be overlooked. See:
www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0144.

Based on information from John Vincent (john@NADDER.org.uk).

WELFARE REFORM

You will be aware that the Rt. Hon. James Purnell, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, has launched a Green Paper presenting proposals for welfare reform. These, I believe it is fair to say, appear to come more from the right than the left of the political divide. Some of you may regard this as no bad thing, but the inevitable consequence is that in Parliament, given Conservative support, the measures, in their final form, will pass. Thus any possible effective opposition to the ideas, as a whole or in part, can only come from the grass roots and will need to be vociferous.

The main proposals

It is proposed to scrap Incapacity Benefits by 2013 and abolish Income Support. In their place there would be two working age benefits: the Employment and Support Allowance for those who have a medical condition that prevents them from working, and Job Seekers' Allowance for everyone who is able to work. People with the most severe disabilities, in the greatest need, will get more cash than now as long-term ESA beneficiaries. But for the vast majority who initially qualify for ESA, the benefit will be seen as temporary stop-gap support. They will be placed in a 'work' category, and will be given personalised back-to-work support to help them prepare for work and overcome any barriers they face. At the heart of the system for those deemed capable of work is the principle of 'conditionality': putting an end to the idea that there is a choice between claiming and working.

Among other things, the proposals envisage that lone parents with children aged seven or over will be required actively to seek work, and that those with younger children will be able to access support to prepare them for work, with a 'skills for work' premium to supplement existing benefits as a weekly financial incentive. You may wonder if disturbing parenting in this way could have unfortunate social consequences, outweighing any improvements in the financial prosperity of families.

JSA claimants will have to comply with a back-to-work action plan. After a year on JSA they will be transferred to a private, public or voluntary sector provider who will be paid by results. They will have to work for their benefits for at least four weeks – possibly longer. For those still out of work and on JSA after two years, the Green Paper proposes to test mandatory full-time working programmes with private and voluntary providers, as well as other approaches, such as requiring daily signing-on. I'm sorry, but it sounds like the workhouse without the bricks and mortar. And chosen Third Sector organisations, instead of being funded for their own chosen charitable purposes will potentially become, for better or for worse, paid instruments of government policy.

'Full' employment

Among the targets of the reforms is to get one million people off Incapacity Benefit and into work and to achieve 80% employment by 2015. You may think that governments are better at grandiose targets than grandiose achievements, and tend to underestimate both the cost of their ideas and their practicability. It will surely be *more* expensive to constrain people into work than simply paying benefits. But what is essentially at stake is the concept of welfare. Of course I want people who can work to be encouraged and helped into suitable work and I deplore shysters who abuse the system,

but the *primary* guiding principle of the welfare state is surely to underpin those who, for whatever reason, simply cannot realistically work for a living, not to advocate forced labour. The people who need support include not only those who are clearly unfit for work, but anyone whose track record is unappealing to employers.

Beveridge

In his statement to Parliament on 21 July, the Minister spoke to a policy of “reforming welfare to reward responsibility” and called up Beveridge in aid. The architect of the welfare state had been “emphatically clear that the system of social security should not stifle incentive, opportunity and responsibility. The purpose of the welfare state was to help people in need today so they could reduce their need tomorrow”. But I also found it instructive to read Beveridge’s later report, *Full Employment in a Free Society*. In the introduction to this thoughtful essay, he makes clear the fundamental purpose of his social security plan: to secure, by a comprehensive scheme of social insurance, that every individual on condition of working while he can and contributing from his earnings, should have an income sufficient for the healthy subsistence of himself and his family; an income to keep him above Want, when for any reason he cannot work and earn. Beveridge was equally concerned about what he called the “preservation of essential liberties”. He took the view that there were some things in Britain “which neither full employment nor the means of achieving it should be allowed to change”. The report, as its title suggested, was not simply about the problem of securing full employment. It was “concerned with the necessity, possibility and methods of achieving full employment in a free society, that is to say, subject to the proviso that all essential citizen liberties are preserved”. For the purposes of his report, Beveridge explicitly cited “freedom of worship, speech, writing, study and teaching; freedom of assembly and of association for political and other purposes, including the bringing about of a peaceful change of the governing authority; freedom in choice of occupation, and freedom in the management of a personal income”. The proviso excluded “the totalitarian solution of full employment in a society completely planned and regimented by an irremovable dictator”. [My underlining]

Disincentives

It is inescapable that one of the factors acting as a barrier to reform is that marginalised people are unlikely to find the kind of work they want or which would make them substantially better off. As things stand, work is not, as is sometimes claimed, necessarily the pathway to prosperity. That is the good fortune of those able to secure well-paid jobs. The problems of many unemployed people often seem intractable and tend to overwhelm any incentive to look for work. Although benefits offer only subsistence support, they feel secure in the cocoon of their safety net. Whereas, if they find work, the tax and National Insurance regime conspires to make low pay even lower, and they face the prospect of diminished Housing and Council Tax Benefits. The tax credits system, intended to help, has proved a disaster. I read that the National Audit Office has found a total loss, through fraud or overpayment, of almost £14 billion since the introduction of tax credits in 2003. It is said that the NAO has refused to sign off the latest set of accounts.

Thus the prime responsibility of government and the first element of reform should surely be to take steps to make the lower tiers of work more financially attractive, and clearly so. If work could be more generously rewarded, and not penalised, even those people who have grown accustomed to a life of dependency would be queuing up for jobs, without pressure and elaborate support mechanisms.

What I am trying to say, imperfectly, is that the proposed cure may be worse than the disease. It sits uneasily with the current economic downturn and is surely damaging for the image of social welfare. At the very least, as Polly Toynbee remarked in ‘The Guardian’ of 22 July, the timing is bad: “extra toughness is an odd response to thousands of jobs cascading out of the building

industry”. As I write, the overall number of unemployment benefit claimants has reached 864,700 and is still rising.

You may not agree with the tone and bias of my assessment; you may think that the proposals are at least good in parts. You may well think that the benefits system is out of control and that something needs to be done. I can see that. I simply argue that reform should be proportionate, achievable and just, and I do urge all of you who are concerned about these issues to make your views known. You have until 22 October. The full Green Paper is at www.dwp.gov.uk/noonewrittenoff.

UCanDoIt

In our final issue of *Innovations in Information* we drew attention to the work of the charity UCanDoIt and its campaign to secure government support and investment in IT for blind, deaf and disabled people. We noticed that huge sums of money are nowadays expended – and sometimes wasted – on all manner of projects, some of doubtful worth, while many genuinely ‘good causes’ are sadly neglected.

We are delighted to see that UCan DoIt has pressed on with its campaign. In its 2007/8 chairman’s report it highlights a debate in the House of Lords, sponsored by Viscount Falkland, on the question “Will the government provide computers and computer training for disabled people in their own homes?”, describing it as “the most important political event of the year”. Lord Falkland said, “For the disabled person at home....the computer is a lifeline..... What amazes me, is that of all the money the government spends on disabled people....not one penny is devoted to computers and training for disabled people”.

In response, Baroness Morgan said, “We recognise how vital it is that disabled people play a full and active part in society....and I absolutely recognise the role of IT, and that support for disabled people in their home to learn about IT and accessing IT is essential”.

Anthony Wigram, UCanDoIt’s chair comments, “The debate was positive and encouraging, but no firm commitments were made. We can only hope that the review of spending outlined in the government paper ‘Progress through Partnership’ will include computers and computer training for disabled people”.

UCanDoIt is now making a real effort to get government to fund computers and training for disabled people in their own homes. As part of this initiative it has launched an e-petition for submission to the Prime Minister and it would help if Forum members would sign up to this at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/ucandoit/>

All power to their cause.

THE LONG-TERM CONDITIONS ALLIANCE (LTCA)

The 2008 Annual Conference of LTCA reinforced the importance of information in giving people with long-term conditions control of their lives and allowing them to live their lives to the full. Commenting afterwards, David Pink, Chief Executive, said that the fundamentals of health and social care do not change, despite what commentators say. “That means good access to services, good information about their condition and its management, and reliable care plans”.

The afternoon was given over to three ‘breakout sessions’, one of which focused on “Improving care for people with long-term conditions through information”. The overall message from this

session was that the voluntary health and social care sector wants to be fully engaged in the development and provision of information and the systems and mechanisms to deliver it, but that there are still too many variations in the way different statutory agencies engage and involve the sector.

In a 'Question Time' session that closed proceedings, Judy Birch from the Pelvic Pain Support Network, asked representatives of the Liberal-Democrats and Conservatives (Labour failed to supply a panel member) what steps they would take "to ensure that the informed and involved patient is embedded at the heart of medical practice". Andrew Lansley, the Conservative shadow health secretary, argued that it was necessary to move to a system that is more concerned with responding to the express needs of patients. Information strategies were needed. We had never got to the business of working out what information service users want, and providing it. Norman Lamb, health spokesman for the Lib-Dems, remarked upon a "dangerous divide created by information directed towards encouraging increasing use of the internet". This, he pointed out, catered for only a minority, excluding the very many people who have no internet access to the information they need to make relevant choices.

The LCTA (www.ltca.org.uk) is an alliance of more than 100 national voluntary organisations working to meet the needs of people with long-term conditions. This article is based on the summer edition of its magazine *Connect*. We are delighted that the need for good information is so much at the heart of the Alliance's work.

PATIENT CHOICE SCHEME SET TO ROLL OUT ACROSS ENGLAND

The Partnership for Patients pilot in public libraries, supported by the NHS's 'Choose and Book' patient referral service, is set to roll out across England, following the Department of Health's report *Choice Matters: working with libraries*.

In the pilot, library staff found information for patients on the People's Network, supported them to understand it and even booked their appointment for them if they wished.

A key role for public librarians in facilitating patient choice is coming increasingly to the fore.

Health Services Minister Ben Bradshaw wrote in the report's foreword: 'Libraries will help to give patients greater choice and control over their healthcare by making it easier for them to find the information they need.'

'Some people will be able to find their way round the relevant websites themselves. But we don't want others, who aren't used to using computers, to lose out. We want everyone to be able to choose what best suits them.'

'The pilot we've run has been successful in delivering information equitably to all, including those vulnerable groups who have traditionally been hard to reach.'

'I look forward to this pilot rolling out across the rest of England...'

This echoes calls by consultant Dr Ike Anya, speaking at the NHS Confederation's recent conference, for the segmenting of health populations according to their health literacy and exploring how 'health navigators' can target the disadvantaged. 'Signposting to a website worked for people with high health literacy but not for those in areas with the worst inequalities,' he said.

And Peckham Library Manager Linda Foster comments in *Choice Matters*: 'Many people are confident enough to get this kind of information for themselves. However, libraries are an excellent place for people who need help to go to.'

CILIP Chief Executive Bob McKee is on the User Council for the Department of Health's NHS Choices website (www.nhs.uk). Launched last year, NHS Choices provides information about a range of health choices including healthy lifestyles, treatment options and NHS services. Patients can use NHS Choices to compare hospitals before making their booking.

NHS Choices Head of Strategy Bob Gann said: 'Digital services have the potential to revolutionise the ways in which people interact with health services and each other – whether via the web, mobile phones or digital TV. Librarians have always been the key information navigators and we are committed to close working with them.'

Reproduced, with kind permission, from CILIP's *Library and Information Update*, July/August 2008.

DIAL UK AND SCOPE JOIN FORCES

DIAL UK has a national network of around 120 local Disability Information and Advice Line groups providing impartial information and advice to around half a million disabled people each year. Under a merger with Scope, which took effect from 1 August, these local groups will remain independent, but DIAL UK, the umbrella organisation, which itself handles a further 25,000 enquiries each year, will be run as part of Scope Response, the national charity's information and advice service.

A recent Scope survey revealed that 36% of disabled people find it difficult to access the information they need to make informed choices. Scope points out that as the move towards personalised budgets gathers momentum, the need for clear and impartial advice and information is increasingly crucial.

For help and advice call 0808 800 3333 or e.mail: response@scope.org.uk.

A NEW VISION TO GUIDE THE WORK OF THE INFORMATION COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE (ICO)

The ICO has an important dual role. It exists to promote access to official information and to protect our personal information. As Richard Thomas, the Information Commissioner, remarks in the IOC's annual report, there has been a sea-change in attitudes towards information rights: "Not only has the tide now well and truly turned, but data protection and freedom of information have substantially grown in stature and influence through the tumultuous waters of the last 12 months." He argues that it is right to set limits on "excessive surveillance and the wider application of data protection as building blocks of the liberties which we can so easily take for granted. Just as terrorism and other threats to our national security remind us that privacy and data protection cannot be absolute rights, so the fight against these evils must not run roughshod over our liberties".

Recent initiatives include a new vision statement which looks to a society where information rights and responsibilities are respected by all. Broken down, this means that:

- Organisations inspire trust by collecting and using personal information responsibly, securely and fairly;
- People understand how their personal information is used, are aware of their rights and are confident in using them; and
- Public authorities are open and transparent, providing people with access to official information as a matter of course;
- People are aware of their rights of access to official information and are confident in using them.

In practical terms, for example, the ICO, aware that some government departments have not taken privacy very seriously, now has a code of practice on information sharing. And from the beginning of next year a new model publication scheme for all local authorities will be adopted, designed to help them provide information pro-actively and transparently.

The full annual report, of absorbing interest, is available free on www.ico.gov.uk or in print from Stationery Office outlets, price £18.55. A summary is also available on the website or from Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF; tel: 08456 306060 or 01625 545 745 if you would prefer to call a national rate number; e.mail: e.mail@ico.gsi.gov.uk.

The website is also a mine of information. ICO can help you to:

- find out what personal information is held about you
- prevent unwanted sales call and spam e-mails
- access information from a public body
- find out information about the environment
- find out how to check your credit record.

GORDON BROWN ON LIBERTY

I wonder if you missed (as I did) the Prime Minister's speech on Liberty at the University of Westminster on 25 October last year. Right now the media sharks are circling Brown as they sense a wounded prey and the opportunity for a kill. Perhaps, therefore, it is timely to reflect on these words of an unusually thoughtful leader who wants a national consultation on the case for a written constitution.

It would do a disservice to a lengthy speech to attempt a summary – it is anyway available in full on the Downing Street website (www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page13630.asp). I would describe it as required reading save that this would intrude on your liberty. But the speech is very strong on the importance of information and a few headlines may whet your appetite. Often, coming from a PM, they seem to me to call for exclamation marks!

Liberty transcends political divisions, and we can start “immediately” to make changes in our constitution and laws to safeguard and extend the liberties of our citizens:

- respecting and extending freedom of assembly; and providing new rights for the public expression of dissent.
- respecting freedom to organise and petition; and providing new freedoms that guarantee the independence of non-governmental organisations.
- respecting freedoms for our press, and the removal of barriers to investigative journalism.
- respecting the public right to know; and providing new rights to access public information where previously it has been withheld.

- respecting privacy in the home, with new rights against arbitrary intrusion.
- in a world of new technology, new rights to protect private information.
- respecting the need for freedom from arbitrary treatment, with new provision for independent judicial scrutiny and open parliamentary oversight.

The single most powerful thread that runs through our history is a succession of chapters in the defence of liberty and toleration.

Freedom means not just freedom from interference, but also freedom to aspire – the opportunity and the chance to live a rounded life in which for everyone there is a place for choice and talent to flourish.

All too often on the political right, liberty has been reduced to a simplistic libertarianism in which freedom and licence have assumed a rough equivalence, while on the left liberty has mistakenly been seen to be at odds with equality.

It is important that charities are guaranteed the independence and the right to have their voice heard and to campaign on the issues that matter to them.

Freedom of Information can be inconvenient, at times frustrating and indeed embarrassing for governments, but it is the right course because government belongs to the people, not the politicians.

It is an irony that the information that can be made available on request on current events and current decisions is still withheld as a matter of course for similar events and similar decisions that happened 20 or 25 years ago.

This is the century of information... We should not fear the advent of the information age, but we need a new and imaginative approach to accountability and to winning people's trust in the ways in which information is held and used.

At all times in our history we have had to debate how the need for strong and effective government can be combined with the pursuit and preservation of liberty. Such debates are both inevitable and desirable... As we make these decisions, we must never forget that the state and the people are not equivalent. The state is always the servant of the people. We must remember that liberty belongs to the people and not governments.

Unless you advise to the contrary we will continue occasionally to send you information of this kind. Conversely, we want to give you the opportunity to network with other member organisations through our information sheets. Please let us know if there is a more personal e.mail address by which we can reach you. Membership is now free.

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