

In the News

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Chair of Christians on Ageing. Here is my look back at some of stories which have made the news during the month of April and which seem relevant to the concerns of our members. Wherever possible I have included links to the original stories which will hopefully give you more information. As always, the comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

Two subjects have really dominated the news stories which I have selected this month. Once again, **Assisted Dying** is one of them, but the other has come freshly to the fore this month and that is the issue of **Carer's Allowance**.

I. Carer's Allowance

Few can imagine how the social care sector would cope without the contribution made by family carers and others who help out on a voluntary basis. Unpaid carers, who offer a minimum of 35 hours care a week, are able to claim Carer's Allowance which amounts to £81.90 a week or around £4,200 per year. If they work and earn £151 in a week – which is around 13 hours at minimum wage – then eligibility for the allowance ceases and the individual must inform the DWP and repay any benefit paid for that week.

The Guardian has been investigating the way in which the benefit operates and has raised the question of why so many carers are being prosecuted.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/07/why-are-so-many-carers-taken-to-court-for-benefit>

Recent increases in the minimum wage have pushed some carers over the earnings limit and the press has been full of horror stories of people being pursued for thousands of pounds and threatened with prosecution, with the DWP saying that if people appeal decisions they will end up paying more back.

According to the analyst group Policy in Practice, an estimated 529,000 carers who were eligible to claim the £81.90 a week benefit did not do so last year, collectively losing out on more than £2bn. There are nearly 6 million unpaid carers in the UK, and about 1 million claim Carer's Allowance. About four in 10 unpaid carers are living in poverty.

The issue has been taken up by politicians on all sides, with a government dementia adviser resigning over the issue, and an all-party parliamentary select committee calling for a change to the rules.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/apr/15/carers-having-to-pay-back-thousands-is-very-wrong-says-starmer>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/17/injustice-92-year-old-with-dementia-told-by-dwp-to-repay-7k-in-disability-allowance>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/17/dwp-accused-cruel-tactics-unpaid-carers-appealing-fines>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/19/humiliated-carer-made-to-pay-back-38k-after-mistake-declaring-income>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/19/unpaid-carers-not-claiming-allowance-benefit>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/19/society-demonises-poverty-prosecute-vulnerable-unpaid-carers-benefits>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/22/mps-call-for-carers-allowance-review-as-numbers-overpaid-soars>

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/23/rishi-sunak-dementia-adviser-resigns-over-treatment-of-unpaid-carers?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/23/rishi-sunak-dementia-adviser-resigns-over-treatment-of-unpaid-carers>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/25/sunak-under-pressure-to-grant-amnesty-to-unpaid-carers-fined-for-benefit-breaches>

This particular benefit came under scrutiny during the last decade and prompted a study of the emotional and financial impact of fines on carers. The internal report has never been published but the Minister for Disabled People has promised that it will be released shortly.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/24/ministers-pledge-publish-long-buried-study-impact-fines-carers-uk>

2. Assisted Dying

BBC Radio 4's Beyond Belief series included an edition on Assisted Dying in early April. Hosted by Giles Fraser the programme explored the issues sensitively with various faith perspectives being included. The programme is available on BBC Sounds.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001y272>

The Westminster Parliament debated the issue on 29 April in response to a petition signed by more than 200,000 people, although no vote was taken. Meanwhile the jurisdiction in Jersey is due to debate the question next month

<http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1663/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/1663/pub/1663/page/70/article/NaN>

3. Dementia

Two reports, seen by The Guardian, appear to suggest that England lags behind the other G7 countries in its capacity to deliver prompt and early diagnoses of dementia, which means that people will miss out on trials of new drugs likely to be approved for testing later this year.

To be eligible for either of the new drugs, lecanemab and donanemab, patients have to be in the early stages of dementia and have had scans to confirm high levels of amyloid in their brain. However, the report says England has the lowest per capita number of PET scanners of any G7 country and the lowest number of MRI scanners. England also has the second-lowest number of dementia specialists needed to diagnose the condition, such as neurologists, old age psychiatrists and geriatricians.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/05/dementia-patients-england-nhs-may-be-denied-access-new-drugs>

Another consequence of the shortage is the likelihood of the numbers of undiagnosed dementia cases rising. The same report suggests that by 2040 around 565,000 undiagnosed cases will exist – a rise of around 25% on current estimates.

<http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1681/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/1681/pub/1681/page/16/article/NaN>

Meanwhile, a report based on a study of 7,000 Norwegians in 305 occupations has indicated a link between how much people use their brains at work and the likelihood of developing thinking and memory problems in older age. The study suggests that “those who held the least mentally demanding jobs had a 66% greater risk of mild cognitive impairment, and a 31% greater risk of dementia, after the age of 70 compared with those in the most mentally taxing roles.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/apr/17/mentally-stimulating-work-plays-key-role-in-staving-off-dementia-study-finds>

4. In other news...

The think tank, Theos has published a fascinating study entitled “Love’s Labours: Good work, care work and a mutual economy” – part of a series of publications called “Work Shift: How Love Could Change Work” aimed at exploring the search for work which has meaning and fosters community. This final part of the series specifically focuses on love, work and care and follows on well from the Archbishops’ Council report on the Care sector which formed the basis of the CoA Conference last autumn.

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2024/04/15/loves-labours-good-work-care-work-and-a-mutual-economy>

The Centre for Ageing Better has broadly welcomed new employment legislation which has come into force establishing workers’ rights to carer’s leave and flexible working, both of which are likely to benefit older workers in particular. As well as having the right to ask for reasonable flexible working from the first day of employment, the new law also creates a new entitlement to a week of leave for unpaid carers who are caring for a dependant with a long-term care need. This will enable carers to better balance their caring and work responsibilities, supporting them to remain in employment.

https://ageing-better.org.uk/news/significant-progress?utm_source=Ageing+Better+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=4bb68f2ab6-AB_Newsletter_Apr_11_2024&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-bca3aaddad-%5B%5D%5Dorg.uk

The question of ‘how old is old?’ has always attracted a variety of answers, but recent research at the University of Berlin has suggested that people are quite different regarding when they think old age begins, dependent on their age, their birth cohort, but also their health etc.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/apr/22/when-old-age-starts-perception-study>

Meanwhile, the latest figures from China suggest that their ageing population is being seen as a demographic crisis for the country’s leadership. According to the BBC’s China Correspondent, Laura Bicker, “A slowing economy, shrinking government benefits and a decades-long one-child policy have created a creeping demographic crisis in Xi Jinping’s China. The pension pot is running dry and the country is running out of time to build enough of a fund to care for the growing number of elderly. Over the next decade, about 300 million people, who are currently aged 50 to 60, are set to leave the Chinese workforce. This is the country’s largest age group, nearly equivalent to the size of the US population.”

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-68595450>

April saw the crown of 'World's oldest man' return to the UK. John Alfred Tinniswood, who lives in a care home in Southport, is 111 and seems underwhelmed by his achievement. One piece of advice he offers is to have Fish and Chips every Friday!"

<http://digitaleditions.telegraph.co.uk/data/1667/reader/reader.html?social#!preferred/0/package/1667/pub/1667/page/44/article/NaN>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/05/briton-says-becoming-worlds-oldest-man-at-111-is-pure-luck>

And finally, a suggestion that the shortage of public lavatories is a sign that Britain despises its older citizens, and news that the forthcoming film based on Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club books will bring work for some of our more mature actors!

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/22/the-shortage-of-public-lavatories-is-proof-britain-despises/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/apr/23/helen-mirren-pierce-brosnan-and-ben-kingsley-set-for-film-of-richard-osman-the-thursday-club-chris-columbus>