

In the News

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Chair of *Christians on Ageing*. Here is my look back at some of the stories which have made the news during the month of May 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.

Clearly the biggest news of the month was the Prime Minister's rather damp announcement of the 4 July General Election. As I write the manifestos are yet to be published, but expect plenty of policy announcements over the coming weeks. Inevitably, because older people tend to vote more than some other age groups, the question of pensioner taxes was raised early on by the Conservative party, with a promise that those on the State Pension will not be drawn into paying income tax.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/may/28/mel-stride-tories-pensions-policy-clamping-down-tax-avoidance>

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/may/28/reality-check-can-treasury-afford-pledge-to-raise-tax-free-pension-allowance>

Of the issues that have been in the news in recent months we can expect some reference to both the Carer's Allowance crisis and how and when Assisted Dying might be debated in a substantive legislative way, rather than simply as a Private Member's Bill, to appear in party manifestos which are likely to appear from next week onwards. For the time being, let's look back.

I. Carer's Allowance / Social Care

The issues raised in April surrounding the government's attempts to recoup overpaid Carer's Allowance, sometimes in an officious and over-reaching way and often some time after the alleged overpayment had been made, have rumbled on throughout May.

One of the worst examples of poor judgement led to ministers having to apologise and return £7,000 in benefits to a 93-year-old woman living with dementia! Meanwhile it emerged that the total figure the government is looking to reclaim is around a quarter of a billion pounds!

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/15/ministers-apologise-and-return-7000-in-benefits-to-woman-93-with-dementia>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/18/ministers-clawing-back-251m-carers-dwp-allowance-failures>

A report on the whole question of the Carer's Allowance was published in the middle of the month – having been commissioned in 2019 when auditors at the Department for Work and Pensions questioned why no one seemed to know that the benefit was causing major headaches for many people. It would seem that the reality was known in 2021 – and led to calls for an inquiry by the Spending Watchdog into the DWP. Inevitably the report led some to draw parallels with the Post Office enquiry!

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/16/carers-allowance-report-a-vivid-insight-into-failings-of-an-unfit-system>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/16/ministers-knew-about-carers-allowance-problems-three-years-ago-report-reveals>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/16/carers-allowance-report-a-vivid-insight-into-failings-of-an-unfit-system>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/10/mps-call-on-spending-watchdog-to-investigate-dwp-overpayments-to-carers>

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/may/17/kate-garraway-persecution-of-carers-has-horrible-echo-of-post-office-scandal>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/27/no-one-would-accept-blame-carers-highlight-dwp-failures-over-debt-crisis>

A week after the report was published it was announced that the National Audit Office would be investigating the scandal.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/23/national-audit-office-to-investigate-growing-scandal-over-carers-allowance>

Meanwhile, as the debate about levels of legal migration are included in election campaigning it is worth noting that those coming to the UK to work in adult social care do not always find themselves in the jobs they were expecting and some feel abandoned and are forced to return from whence they came.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/11/migrant-care-workers-told-to-leave-uk>

2. Assisted Dying

The big news this month is that Jersey is to move ahead with allowing assisted dying for people with a terminal illness after a vote in its parliament. Legislation is expected to be brought before the island's States Assembly by the end of 2025, and an assisted dying service for residents to be in place by mid-2027. As a crown dependency, Jersey can make its own laws. The Isle of Man, another crown dependency, is also expected to legalise assisted dying for residents in the next 18 months.

In the Scottish parliament, a bill to allow assisted dying for terminally ill adults could have its first vote later this year, and at Westminster, Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer have both promised to allow time for a backbench bill in the next parliament under pressure from public opinion and a significant shift in the views of MPs since the last vote in 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/22/jersey-approves-plans-assisted-dying-terminally-ill-adult-residents>

Meanwhile, elsewhere a 29-year-old Dutch woman who has been granted her request for assisted dying on the grounds of unbearable mental suffering is expected to end her life in the coming weeks, fuelling a debate across Europe over the issue.

Zoraya ter Beek received the final approval last week for assisted dying after a three-and-a-half-year process under a law passed in the Netherlands in 2002.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/16/dutch-woman-euthanasia-approval-grounds-of-mental-suffering>

Finally, a British woman who had an assisted death in New Zealand where she lived, called on the UK to change its law to give seriously ill people choices about the end of their life.

Tracy Hickman, 57, who had terminal cancer, said her message to UK politicians was: “Look at what New Zealand has done, and do it even better. There is a lot of focus on the right to life, but people should have the right to a peaceful, gentle death.”

Her sister, Linda Clarke, who lives in the UK, echoed her call. “If Tracy was still in the UK, I’d have to watch her go through a horrific death,” she said.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/12/woman-having-assisted-death-in-new-zealand-calls-for-uk-law-change>

<https://bakertillysr.nz/news/obituary-tracy-hickman/>

3. Dementia

I was brought up in Wollaton, a suburb of Nottingham. My wife and I married on the last Saturday in July 1979, and we shared our wedding flowers with a couple marrying in the church 72 hours later. I knew the bride for she and her family lived about 150 yards from our house. Why do I include this in the news? Because the couple involved were Carol and Stuart Jennings, and their story was featured in a very moving documentary, *The Jennings v Alzheimer’s*. I had followed their story for many years, and was well aware of the impact Carol’s decisions had had on dementia research. She died at the end of March, but her legacy will live on for years.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/may/13/the-jennings-v-alzheimers-review-how-one-letter-caused-a-medical-revolution>

All of this happened as research undertaken for the Alzheimer’s Society shows that the “colossal” costs of the disease are likely to more than double from an already “staggering” £42.5bn today to £90.6bn. That projected rise will happen in line with an expected increase in the number of diagnosed cases from 981,575 to 1,402,010, related to an ageing and growing population. The Alzheimer’s Society and the British Geriatrics Society (BGS), which represents doctors who specialise in care of older people, said the huge costs of dementia – Britain’s biggest killer – should prompt ministers and the NHS to take urgent action to improve early diagnosis.

https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/13/cost-of-dementia-to-uk-could-almost-double-to-91bn-by-2040-study-finds?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

4. In other news...

And finally a series of smaller stories which made me read them!

Polly Toynbee wrote a piece based around the question, ‘How old is old?’ She confesses that at 77 she is still unsure.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/04/old-age-social-media-young-people>

Responses from Guardian readers suggested that ‘it’s not how old you are that matters – it’s **how** you are old.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/article/2024/may/10/its-not-how-old-you-are-that-matters-its-how-you-are-old>

A related subject concerns the terminology we use in speaking about age. I have written about this in the about-to-be-published summer edition of *plus*, the magazine for members of *Christians on Ageing*. The British **Geriatric** Society (BGS) has recently published a list of preferred language

to be used when referring to older people in a health context. It has been compiled to help healthcare professionals, academics and authors to avoid language which may be considered unacceptable or inappropriate. The list provides a guide on language to avoid and preferred alternatives. <https://www.bgs.org.uk/resources/preferred-language-when-referring-to-older-people-in-a-health-context>

Finding the language to describe older people at risk of falling may become easier if we turn our backs on caffeinated drinks! That is the message from Care England and its CEO, Martin Green, based on the report 'Decaffeination and falls prevention.' Stow Healthcare and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust (UHL) has conducted a six-month trial at eight care homes that has shown switching to decaffeinated hot drinks cuts toilet-related falls by 35%. The trial followed a similar initiative by UHL in 2021, where it was found that switching to decaffeinated drinks reduced bladder and bowel urgency in those with an overactive bladder or incontinence. Within three months, toilet-related falls in the hospital were down by 30%. Professor Green said, "When we first heard about the results of UHL's decaf trial in a hospital setting the potential benefits for social care were immediately clear. For such a simple, cost-neutral solution to have such a profound impact is extraordinary. Give decaf a go!"

https://www.careengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Decaffeination-and-Falls-Prevention_Final_Online-2.pdf

Inevitably there have been several articles focussing on those leaving Parliament voluntarily, some of which reflect on the changes in society that people have noticed during their lifetime or their time as an MP. Margaret Hodge's piece was interesting.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/may/13/we-had-money-it-was-brilliant-margaret-hodge-on-labour-governments-life-as-a-migrant-and-quitting-as-an-mp>

Thinking about retirement may become more problematic for many as an increasing number of homeowners are taking out mortgages which will last well beyond state pension age. The data, obtained via a freedom of information (Fol) request by the former Lib Dem pensions minister Steve Webb, show the proportion of home loans arranged to last into retirement increased from 31% in the final quarter of 2021 to 42% in the same period last year. More than a million mortgages that stretch beyond the borrower's state pension age have been arranged in the last three years, figures show.

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/article/2024/may/13/rise-in-ultra-long-mortgages-poses-risk-to-uk-retirement-prospects>

And finally, just when you thought that life could not become more weird or dystopian, comes the headline "Digital recreation of dead people needs urgent regulation, ethicists say!" According to the article, "digital recreations of dead people are on the cusp of reality and urgently need regulation, AI ethicists have argued, warning "deadbots" could cause psychological harm to, and even "haunt," their creators and users. Such services, which are already technically possible to create and legally permissible, could let users upload their conversations with dead relatives to "bring grandma back to life" in the form of a chatbot, researchers from the University of Cambridge suggest. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/09/digital-recreations-of-dead-people-need-urgent-regulation-ai-ethicists-say>