

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 October 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 events have dominated the news media during October – the forthcoming parliamentary debate on Assisted Dying, which is scheduled for late November, and the budget which was delivered by the Chancellor on October 30.

I. Assisted Dying

I will not attempt to list all the contributions and interventions made around this issue – they are simply too numerous and, often, repetitive. The basic fact is that Labour MP Kim Leadbeater is putting forward a private members bill to allow assisted dying, with a debate and vote expected on November 29. The Prime Minister has promised a free vote on the issue. The text of the bill has not been published yet but it is expected to be similar to a bill going through the Lords, which would allow terminally ill adults with six months or fewer to live to get medical help to end their own lives and would apply only to people "mentally able to make the decision". Two doctors and the high court would have to approve. It is known that several Cabinet members intend to vote against the bill.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/03/mps-vote-first-time-assisted-dying-bill-uk-parliament>

Both the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, spoke out against the bill, although George Carey, one of Justin Welby's predecessors, urged him to support the bill.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/18/george-carey-archbishop-c-of-e-bishops-lords-back-assisted-dying-bill>

Kim Leadbeater wrote to Justin Welby asking to meet, adding "that a decision about how to reduce suffering at the end of life should sow discord and division." She said there will not be a slippery slope because "parliament will have drawn a very clear and settled line that should not be crossed." She said it is entirely possible to value life while taking different views on whether dying people had a choice over how their lives end.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/17/kim-leadbeater-assisted-dying-bill-archbishop-of-canterbury-meeting>

In the end the meeting also included the Bishop of London, Dame Sarah Mullaly, and was described by Ms Leadbeater as "good and productive," but it's understood there was an agreement that no further details of their conversation would be made public.

Among the many contributions to the public debate was one from the retired Judge, Nicholas Mostyn, who lives with Parkinson's disease. He pointed out that he and others with Parkinson's disease would not be included in the scope of this current bill

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/13/expected-assisted-dying-bill-no-use-to-parkinsons-patients-nicholas-mostyn>

Many who speak out against the bill point to the role to be played by palliative care, it is clear that there is currently inadequate provision in the vital area.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/20/end-of-life-care-in-england-and-wales-cant-cope-with-demand-say-doctors-opposed-to-assisted-dying>

On the day before the bill is debated the Church Times and the group Modern Church are holding an online seminar entitled Can a Good Death be Assisted. Two of the panellists were part of our Annual Conference back in September, while another is James Woodward, well known to many of us within CoA. Details of the online seminar can be found here.

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/can-a-good-death-be-assisted-a-church-times-webinar>

2. Carer's Allowance / Social Care

While it was clear the budget was likely to address issues and funding within the NHS, it was equally unlikely to offer hope of immediate action in the field of social care. Nevertheless, Health secretary Wes Streeting has been urged to speed up reforms to the adult care system in the wake of patient deaths after two coroners warned him of the impact insufficient care beds and service provision are having on the NHS. Last month, coroners sent two prevention of future deaths (PFD) reports to the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) after the inability to discharge patients at two hospitals was linked to the deaths of others awaiting treatment.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/06/coroners-warn-of-risk-to-lives-without-urgent-reform-of-nhs-adult-care>

One thing the budget did include was an increase of £45 per week on the earnings limit faced by those claiming carer's allowance. The changes will enable full-time unpaid carers who provide care for at least 35 hours a week to earn up to £196 a week from next April without forfeiting carer's allowance benefit, currently £81.90 a week. The move was welcomed by campaigners and carers who said it would make "a massive difference" to helping them keep a foothold in the job market.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/30/carers-earnings-limit-to-rise-by-45-a-week-in-wake-of-allowance-scandal>

Meanwhile, the health minister Liz Kendall does plan to review the rules surrounding unpaid carers' allowance which have caused so much outcry in recent months.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/oct/15/labour-to-set-up-review-after-carers-allowance-overpayments-scandal>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/16/unpaid-carers-allowance-benefits-liz-kendall-review>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/17/from-the-cliff-edge-to-the-dwp-what-will-uk-carers-allowance-review-look-at>

In other news comes the claim that almost all the care homes forced to shut were run for profit. Research from Oxford University put the figure at 98% for adult care homes closing between 2011 and 2023. (2011 was the year of the Southern Cross collapse)

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/06/private-firms-ran-almost-all-care-homes-forced-to-shut-for-breaches-in-england>

3. Dementia

Within the area of Dementia care, research and practise, there is on-going debate over accessing expensive new drug treatments whose benefits are still being assessed. and which disease-modifying Alzheimer's drugs are the most promising? Both donanemab and lecanemab were approved by the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), yet the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) said their benefits were too small to justify their costs, while there have also been concerns over potential side-effects – such as brain swelling and bleeding.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/25/disease-modifying-alzheimers-drugs-most-promising>

Meanwhile a new research project has been launched to explore links between air pollution and the onset of dementia, and firms are in a bidding war to win £1m for dementia technology.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/20/does-air-pollution-cause-dementia-uk-scientists-launch-study-to-find-out>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/08/ai-glasses-anticipating-falls-tech-firms-vie-1m-dementia-technology>

4. In other news...

The month began with the International Day for Older People

<https://ageing-better.us | .list-manage.com/track/click?u=148d006f4133eac09bdc78005&id=060a406c3c&e=e2ba1dad52>

To mark it the Office for National Statistics addressed the issue of improving the visibility of older people within global statistics. One clear issue is recognising that the annoying tendency to lump together older people as being “over 65” for example renders the data meaningless and hides many important trends.

<https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2024/10/01/improving-the-visibility-of-older-people-in-global-statistics/>

<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/citygroups/2487%20Improving%20the%20Visibility%20of%20Older%20Persons%20in%20Global%20Statistics%20v1-0.pdf>

Another story with a statistical basis is the claim that we may have reached the point when the number of people living past 100 has peaked. The major contributory factor in this though is not recent – it lies in the huge increase in the birth-rate immediately after the end of the First World War.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/oct/01/peak-longevity-number-of-centenarians-falls-in-england-and-wales>

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/13/good-news-everyone-we-appear-to-have-reached-peak-longevity?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

And the Observer added to the focus on living to 100 with this fascinating article.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/oct/13/why-everything-you-think-about-living-to-100-might-be-wrong>

And a final glimpse at statistics comes with the news that for the first time since the mid-1970's, deaths have outstripped births in the UK – ignoring the effects of the Covid pandemic.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/08/deaths-outstrip-births-in-uk-for-first-time-in-nearly-50-years>

Two other stories relating to end-of-life issues have featured during the month. The openness with which cycle legend Sir Chris Hoy has approached his terminal cancer diagnosis has evoked a positive response, with Simon Jenkins amongst those seeking to learn lessons.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/21/chris-hoy-positive-terminal-cancer-science>

And earlier in the month came news that the Law Commission has launched a consultation on a proposed overhaul of legislation on burial grounds, as there is a shortage of space in overcrowded cemeteries. It could mean that graves may be reopened and reused to bury the dead, in all types of burial grounds, including the Church of England's cemeteries and churchyards. The Law Commission says reform is overdue with much of the legislation governing cemeteries dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, which has developed piecemeal since then. Interestingly, in much of mainland Europe, families do not buy burial plots on a freehold basis, but rather lease them for 30 years, which can then be renewed or ended as required.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/03/graves-could-be-reused-under-proposals-to-tackle-lack-of-space-for-the-dead>

Three stories focussed on people's hopes for a more positive outlook on ageing, recognising that poor employment provision and housing can blight people's wellbeing in later life.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/20/we-want-a-happy-old-age-at-home-not-in-a-home>

https://ageing-better.org.uk/commissioning-employment-and-skills-provision-over-50s-commissioner-toolkit?utm_source=Ageing+Better+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=a8ed3b14a6-AB_newsletter_oct_24_2024&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f4499c1616-a8ed3b14a6-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D

https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/CFAB_Safe_homes_now_spotlight.pdf

And research has been published indicating that we are not alone in becoming a little withdrawn in later life. But whereas it may be seen as a negative for humans, other animals find the trend to be beneficial!

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/oct/29/animals-become-less-sociable-as-they-age-in-similar-way-to-humans-research-shows>

The month began with the International Day for Older People. It ends with one of the country's largest charities working amongst older people having a rebrand and launching a new campaign. Age UK want to start a national conversation about ageing, and have issued their rallying cry as "Let's change how we age!" Watch this space for updates as they come in!

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/get-involved/letschange/?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=brand_launch_letschange&utm_content=60s&fbclid=IwY2xjawGNY_ZleHRuA2FibQIxMAABHelqMsCXF7UFRYnvHt_9ulpeLUFPkyN8tw6bjmMZevEdQv-msg63oD50Dw_aem_QYO5mYc540nhwJTZEDQRuA