

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 December and which seem relevant to the concerns of our members. As always, the comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

Changes to the Guardian website make it harder to share links to all the stories but I will do my best reference my sources. If you have never come across the Religion Media Centre, you can sign up to receive their daily email updates on relevant news stories at <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/>

1. Government / Parliament

As winter has begun, and brought with it cold and stormy weather, the fall-out from the government's decision to limit the winter fuel allowance to only those pensioners in receipt of pension credit has continued, with attacks coming from all shades of political opinion, and from many other sources as well.

Age UK has published research suggesting that around a million elderly people are skipping meals in order to cover energy costs, and predict a knock-on effect of increased demand on NHS resources as those with chronic health conditions become more ill.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/dec/07/winter-fuel-crisis-one-million-elderly-already-skipping-meals-and-applications-system-overwhelmed>

The effects of poverty on life-expectancy have long been known and a recent study by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that Blackpool has overtaken Glasgow in having the lowest male life-expectancy in the UK. Men living in Blackpool will now live until just after their 73rd birthday on average, six years less than the average in the rest of England, and a decade less than those living in parts of rural Hampshire. The research highlights some of the many issues behind the statistics, not least the fact that the demise of Blackpool as a holiday destination led to an excess of low-rent properties which have tended to attract a disproportionate number of renters in poor health.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/09/down-by-the-sea-poverty-brings-blackpool-life-expectancy-to-uk-low>

2. Carer's Allowance / Social Care

The announcement of yet another independent commission into reforms of adult social care came just after New Year and will be covered next month. (And given that it is not due to report until 2028 it may feature in subsequent months too!)

The pressure which led to the announcement has been building for years, ever since the previous recommendations found their way into the political long grass, largely due to the likely cost of any reforms which might address the core problems. In a letter to The Observer, Laura Davies, the COO of the Good Care Group pointed to the immediate effect of recent changes announced in the Budget, surrounding minimum wage and Employers' NI rates, which will push up costs.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/01/only-proper-funding-can-rescue-social-care>

An opinion piece in The Guardian outlined the nature of the problem and called for prompt action.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/03/the-guardian-view-on-social-care-reformers-must-reclaim-the-initiative>

Paul Burstow, Minister of State for Care under the coalition government 2010-2012, wrote of his own reflections on previous failures of nerve, and underlined the need for cross-party buy-in at an early stage of any new enquiry.

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/20/breaking-the-social-care-reform-logjam?CMP=share_btn_url

One aspect of the crisis which the government has taken steps to address concerns the so-called scandal surrounding carers' allowance, whereby people whose earnings creep over a threshold lose their entire allowance and have often faced ruinous penalties as over-payments are pursued – by which time earnings may have dipped below the threshold.

The UK government has now promised a “new settlement” for unpaid carers, vowing to put an end to the scandal of carer benefit overpayments that has left hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people in huge debt and in some cases facing prosecution. A review, chaired by the disability policy expert Liz Sayce, will look into how the problem was allowed to arise under the previous government and to suggest a way forward. It is expected to report in early summer 2025. Stephen Timms, the minister for social security and disability, said: “We want a new settlement, in which our carers are genuinely supported to carry out their sacrificial work. Where admiring stories are told of their service, rather than of unwitting debt accrual and of repayments the carers have had to make. The review will be key to this new settlement.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/08/labour-needs-the-will-to-solve-social-care-crisis>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/08/uk-ministers-carers-benefit-allowance-scandal-independent-review>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/11/hundreds-of-thousands-hit-by-ruinous-carers-allowance-penalties-audit-shows>

3. Assisted Dying

Following Parliament's decision last month to give a second reading to the proposed legislation, most of the action this month has been behind the scenes before the next stage of work begins in the New Year. The most significant announcement this month was the membership of the Committee of Scrutiny. Made up of 14 supporters, including two ministers; nine opponents and senior voices from both sides of the debate, the committee will review the legislation line-by-line and suggest amendments before it goes any further. The MPs will decide how much time to spend going through the bill. But it is expected to sit for up to two days a week for several weeks from the second half of January. They will hold public hearings with experts invited to give evidence before proposing amendments to the bill.

Those behind the bill hope to have the committee process finished in time for it to return to the House of Commons on 25 April. It is at that stage when all MPs will have a chance to debate and vote on the changes proposed by the committee. Meanwhile it is reported that around 30 MPs

who backed the bill in November could withdraw their support if further safeguards are not included at Committee stage.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3e34gvzlv0o#:~:text=The%20committee%20is%20made%20Up,Minister%20%2D%20Voted%20for%20the%20bill>

Central to debate in parliament has been a focus on the current state of palliative care, with some suggesting that the time spent on the current assisted dying bill has limited the government's ability to focus on wider NHS reforms including improving access to palliative care.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/01/assisted-dying-bill-brings-critical-state-of-palliative-care-into-governments-focus>

Nevertheless a commission to explore and transform end of life care has been established under the leadership of MP Rachel Maskell.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/01/blueprint-drawn-up-to-deliver-unprecedented-transformation-of-end-of-life-care>

4. In other news...

And finally... The New Year always brings an increase in numbers taking out gym membership, but research published in December suggests a link between exercise and improving the memory. A study from University College London has shown that 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity and sleeping for at least six hours at night, could contribute to improved cognitive performance the following day. Inevitably some seek to extrapolate from these results and suggest that, by extension, daily exercise has a direct causal link on reducing the likelihood of developing dementia. However, this study does not back up that claim directly, albeit that "protecting our brains as we age" is always likely to be beneficial.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/dec/10/exercise-improves-memory-walk-cycle>

The Religion Media Centre has produced a review of religion news for 2024 which is available on their YouTube Channel and as a podcast. The links are [here](#). A timeline of religion stories in 2024 is [here](#).

<https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/rmc-briefings/review-of-religion-news-2024/>

<https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/religion-in-the-news-in-2024-a-review-of-the-year/>

It's known as living apart, together. Being in a serious relationship while remaining at separate addresses has long been a lifestyle more associated with people starting out in life. But those aged 60 and above who date like people in their 20s enjoy better mental wellbeing, the largest study of its kind has found. The new research relied on data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, tracking the over-60s, their relationships and their mental health between 2011 and 2023 – the first time the subject has been looked at on a national scale.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/03/over-60s-who-live-apart-from-partners-have-better-wellbeing-study-finds>

I recently listened to a series of podcasts – Shadow World: The Willpower detectives available on BBC Sounds.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0k95rjn#xtor=CS8-1000-%5BEditorialPromo_Box%5D-%5BNewsEditorial_Promo%5D-%5BNewsEditorial_Promo%5D-%5BPS_SOUNDS~N~p0k95rjn~P_PowerAttorney%5D

It exposes a series of potential frauds carried out on older people living in a care home, through the abuse of Lasting Power of Attorney provision.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp3zd40kdgyo>

Another useful source of stories around later life is the regular bulletins issued by the Centre for Ageing Better. You can sign up to this via <https://ageing-better.org.uk/enews>

One story featured this month concerns the government's proposals to reform employment, health and skills support to tackle economic inactivity and support people into good work in the form of its Get Britain Working Again White Paper. It is suggested that the proposals could affect workers in their 50s and 60s.

https://ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/governments-major-employment-support-reforms-could-make-major-difference?utm_source=Ageing+Better+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=c42b1fcf16-research_and_policy_newsletter_December_2024&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_a1092363ef-375066448

The month ended with the death of a remarkable 100-year-old. Jimmy Carter was a none-too-successful President of the USA from 1977-1981, the first Conservative Evangelical to occupy that office, having been a life-long member of the Baptist Church. His post-Presidential life however was marked by receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, and years of humble, wise service to the world he loved.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c163e0wzgn3o>

A slightly less remarkable elder is Ray Eveleigh who lives near Bridlington. Aged 88 he has recently passed his grade 8 piano with distinction, 67 years after taking grade 7! He expressed surprise that his achievement had received wide coverage, adding that he was not a perfect piano student as a child and was always getting told off for not practising, but it was at Cardiff university when he met his wife, Brenda, a singer, that he decided to take the instrument more seriously. "She was a soprano at the Royal College of Music and Drama in Cardiff. She wanted an accompanist, so then I had to do some work. I learned to read music without an ulterior motive," he said, laughing.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/dec/11/man-88-passes-grade-8-piano-distinction-67-years-after-grade-7>