

Prime Minister carries off Age Concern's manifesto

Inside:

Conservatives' proposals for grandparents

Abolish mandatory retirement, says Lord Peston

PM visits Age Concern Wandsworth for Better Health in Old Age report launch

Why we need a public duty on age

Daylight robbery: thousands short-changed in care homes

Mr Blair in his Sedgefield constituency for the launch of Age Concern's Handyvan scheme aimed at promoting independent living

Staff at Age Concern Durham made the most of Prime Minister Tony Blair's attendance at the launch of the Handyvan Scheme last month by making sure he got a copy of the charity's manifesto **Isn't it time politicians stopped just kissing babies?**

Mr Blair left the event carrying his copy of Age Concern's manifesto, which warns politicians of all parties that they ignore older people at their peril.

The charity's Director General, Gordon Lishman said: "This election may very well be the first determined by the votes of the 20 million over-50s in the UK today. Older people are more likely to vote, and are not afraid to switch political allegiance if they believe it will improve their lives."

Age Concern's specific demands on pensions include a call to increase the Basic State Pension to £105 a week to cover living costs.

"The nation as a whole needs to ensure that it doesn't face poverty in retirement. As our standard of living rises there needs to be greater saving for pensions, which reflects our growing affluence," said Mr Lishman.

The charity wants to see the age at which people can claim the Basic State Pension to remain at 65, in recognition that poorer workers have shorter lives. A male manual worker, for example, has a life expectancy of 71 - for men in the Glasgow

constituency of Shettleson life expectancy is just 64.

Other manifesto calls include a better pensions deal for carers; and for employers to contribute to their workers' pensions.

Age Concern England is also campaigning to have ageism outlawed, both in the workplace and in society as a whole. Mr Lishman explained: "It cannot be right to deny any group of citizens basic human rights, including access to health care, education and employment on the basis of their age - but that's just what is happening here in Britain today. Later life should be a time of opportunity - it's time to break the age barriers."

Age Concern's agenda calls on the Government to abolish mandatory retirement ages; establish a Commission for Equality and Human Rights; and to end discrimination in health and social care.

It also wants a public duty to promote age equality that would require public bodies and organisations in receipt of government funding to ensure their policies and practices are not ageist - an idea which has already worked well in Northern Ireland.

The Handyvan scheme was runner up in the Department of Health's (DH) Modernisation Awards 2002 for the Northern and Yorkshire Region's Older People's Services category, and is featured on the DH website as an example of good practice. Harriet Gibbon,

Chief Office, Age Concern Durham County, says: "Handyvan is an example of how a simple service and a commitment to partnership working by different agencies can make a big difference to the quality of life experienced by older people."



Tories to boost grandparents' childcare role

The vital contribution made to childcare by grandparents throughout the country should be properly recognised, says Michael Howard MP, the Conservative party leader



In a speech on childcare last month Mr Howard said: "We need to understand that many women rely on what I call the traditional support network – their parents, their children's grandparents. A third of grandmothers spend the equivalent of three days a week caring for their grandchildren. Government should be supporting that support network."

Conservative proposals include reforming childcare tax credits, paying cash directly to parents and allowing them to spend it on the childcare of their choice, which could mean paying grandparents for the help they provide.

Mr Howard also said it should be easier for grandparents to qualify as childminders. He said it was "absurd"

for grandparents, who had already had plenty of experience of childcare, having brought up children of their own and might be already caring for grandchildren, to go through time consuming and expensive training.

"We will fast-track them with short courses to bring them up-to-date," he said.

Reward all carers, Age Concern tells Conservative women

Carers' £15 billion annual contribution to the economy should be properly rewarded, with those looking after grandchildren or sick or disabled adults given the same rights as parents of young children, Age Concern England's Campaigns and Parliamentary Unit Manager, Katie Ghose, told the Conservative Women's Conference last month.

"Age Concern England is delighted that the Conservative Party has been engaging with the problems of pensions for women and pleased that David Willets MP, the Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and his colleagues are looking at different ways to address the problems that particularly affect those who take career breaks to bring up children and care for relatives."

She said the existing confusing system covering contributions to carer's pensions should be replaced with a simple weekly carer's credit, allowing everyone to build up a decent pension in later life. "It remains a fact that a woman's retirement income is, on average, just 53 per cent of a man's. Single women are more likely to live in poverty in retirement than single men."

Ms Ghose said that many older women felt unrewarded and unfairly treated by a system which had failed to adapt to rising divorce rates and changing patterns of work.

She pointed out that a few simple reforms would increase the value of older women in society: "We should scrap compulsory retirement ages, giving women who have taken time out of their careers the chance to build up a decent pension, and we need a new organisation, a single equality and human rights body, to provide somewhere to turn to for older women who may face discrimination on the grounds of their age and gender."

Politicians should not ignore older women: "Many of them are undecided about how they will vote, but 67 per cent of women aged 55 and over went to the polling booths at the last General Election and two-thirds are sure that they will turn out next time. Older women are an electoral force to be reckoned with – and likely to use the ballot box to punish those who fail to listen to them," she concluded.

A fifth of women pensioners currently live in poverty in the UK



Lords debate lambasts “ageist society” and says older people are an asset

The outgoing chairman of the Lords’ Committee on Economic Affairs used a House of Lords debate on the ageing population on 12 November to launch an attack on employers who want mandatory retirement ages. He said it was “absurd” that the fact that people were living longer, healthier lives was seen as a problem

Lord Peston said that his committee’s report on Aspects of the Economics of an Ageing Population, released at the beginning of this year, concluded that the only reason for a mandatory retirement age was because employers: “Find it very difficult to run a capitalist system and a market economy, where you are supposed to judge things according to what is efficient and effective. They find it much easier to have a completely arbitrary rule, because then they do not have to judge anyone or do the job that they are supposed to do.”

He said that society had not kept up with the fact that people were living longer and healthier lives, and the notion that this was a problem was “the most absurd thing that anyone could dream up”. An ageing population, he added, was a crisis only if the nation chose not to solve solvable problems.

Baroness Greengross bemoaned the Government’s “rate-of-return” approach

to financing students which prevents over 55s from obtaining student loans: “If a person is old and late in life, and getting an education because he or she thinks that it is a good thing – to which he is perfectly entitled – we will not give them a loan.”

Castigating the Government for its own ageist employment practices she said “it is not true that we cannot get rid of ageism” and called for people to be appointed to public bodies on the basis of their ability and not their years.

In her maiden speech, Baroness Royall said age discrimination in healthcare was not only unjust, but economically inefficient: “If people with chronic disease are refused treatment or are neglected in their care, before they die they will demand and expect a higher level of care for longer. This will have an immediate effect on the wider economy.”

The Liberal Democrats’ spokesperson on Education and Skills, Baroness Sharp of Guildford, pointed out that the total value of unpaid work provided by older people in this country amounts to £24 billion – 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product: “It is reckoned that £15 billion goes into caring for older relatives; £4 billion into grand-parenting and £5 billion into other volunteering activities such as work for Citizens Advice Bureaux and Age Concern,” she said.

Replying for the Government, Baroness Hollis said she hoped that employers’ concerns about ending mandatory retirement age was “ill-founded” and one that the Government could work to overcome. She thanked the committee for its work and said the Pensions Commission would build on the Lords’ findings.

Older people a priority

Malcolm Dean, leader writer for the Guardian newspaper told a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Ageing and older people on 16 November that older people’s issues were higher up the political agenda than at any other time in his 30 year career.

On the question of pensions he said: “Never before has as much attention focused on the pensions crisis as currently - and it is interesting that some sort of consensus on the issue seems to be emerging.”

He described the growing ageing population and increased longevity witnessed in the last century as a triumph rather than an apocalypse. He pointed out the political power of the over-65s, whose numbers are growing and who can be relied on to turn out to vote.

In a wide-ranging discussion Malcolm Dean highlighted the diversity of older people and the huge inequality in retirement and differences in both income and wealth. He said it was crucial to understand that “older people are not a homogenous group and neither is ageing a chronological uniform pattern”.



Photo Credit: Jess Hurd / reportagejournal.co.uk

Up to the job: older workers have a lot to offer

Older people to play a part in improving health services, as emphasis shifts to well-being in old age

Older people are healthier, more active and live longer than ever before, according to a new report from Professor Ian Philp, National Director for Older People's Health, who forecasts that an ageing population will take an increasingly active part in looking after itself

The report, **Better Health in Old Age**, charts the progress made by health and social care services over the last decade and measures it against the standards set by the Department of Health's National Service Framework for Older People, which was launched last year. It highlights NHS services such as expert help with stopping smoking and health screening as contributing to the improvements.

Professor Philp said investment and reform in older people's services needed to be followed through by building a system of care around the needs of one of the major groups using the NHS while "creating a new emphasis and priority around promoting the health, well-being and independence of older people".

The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said: "The challenge for the future is to make sure services enable older people to stay safe and well at home."

Professor Philp warned that services would have to expand and improve further to meet the demands of an ageing society and said that older people should have greater control over their health care: "Over the next few years I expect older people to have increasingly positive expectations for good health in old age."



The Prime Minister and Health Secretary John Reid MP visit a "keep on moving" class for older people in south London at the launch of the Better Health in Old Age report. The classes, designed to build confidence as well as fitness, are a joint venture between the NHS and Age Concern Wandsworth

"This means older people having greater control over their services as well as taking more responsibility for looking after their own health."

Age Concern England's Director General, Gordon Lishman, welcomed the report but said that significant improvements were still necessary: "Ingrained ageist attitudes mean that older people are routinely receiving second class treatment from health and social care services. There are clear gaps in mental health services, for example, with many finding it impossible to get the help they need when they reach 65.

"And while the report highlights the advantages of health screening, women over 70 are still not automatically invited for breast checks, despite being at higher risk of developing breast cancer."

Health Secretary John Reid added: "Age discrimination is being rooted out of health and social care services but more needs to be done if we are to build services that will treat older people with the dignity and respect they deserve."

Health improvements outlined in **Better Health in Old Age**:

- a million bed days saved through reductions in delayed discharges;
- increased life expectancy to 81 for men and 84 for women aged 65 in 2002;
- a fall in death rates from coronary heart disease for the over-65s from 1381 per 100,000 in 1993 to 875 in 2003



Photo Credit: AC Photo Library / Jamie Arley

Time for a public duty on age to protect all older people in the UK



As the Government announces plans to introduce duties requiring public bodies to promote gender and disability equality Michelle Mitchell, Age Concern England's Head of Public Affairs, explains why we need an age duty as well

An equality duty is a requirement that organisations in the public sector consider equality in all aspects of their work, involving employees, citizens and service-users alike. The Race Equality Duty, introduced following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, is a duty for public bodies throughout Britain to 'eliminate racial discrimination' and to 'promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups', while in Wales, Northern Ireland and London there are duties for devolved public bodies to promote equality of opportunity, including age equality. The Government is promising new laws to introduce equality duties for disability and gender.

Age equality

Age discrimination legislation covering employment and adult education is scheduled for 2006. But the Government says it will not even consider the case for an age equality duty until 2007. The Department of Health has introduced a non-statutory standard to 'root out age discrimination' in health and social care,

as part of the National Service Framework for Older People. While this requirement has led to some of the most blatant age restrictions being removed in health (though not in social care) it has not tackled unequal outcomes or ageist attitudes and practice and, as there is no mechanism for enforcing the standard, in practice it remains voluntary.

Successful

Overall, equality duties have been successful in raising awareness and have acted as powerful levers to promote equality within organisations. In Northern Ireland two-thirds of public bodies report that the duty has had positive impacts on relationships with older people.

Examples of improved services for older people include a council re-introducing hot meals-on-wheels, the opening of 'Right To Buy' to people over 60 and the reform of voluntary sector grants to prevent the exclusion of older people's groups.

Action

Age Concern wants to see an age equality duty introduced, alongside the

new gender duty, before the General Election. The duty could be included as part of the proposed Bill to set up the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. The duty should come into force in October 2006 to coincide with the new age discrimination legislation covering employment and adult education.

Other Viewpoints

“ An age positive duty would require a fundamental reconsideration of existing practices and policies. It would also generate key benefits for society at large, by contributing to the identification and rooting-out of patterns of structural age discrimination that impose huge costs on society. The Employers' Forum on Age have argued that ageism in employment costs the UK £31 billion every year in lost production, and that “as the population and dependency ratio increases, improving labour market participation rates, particularly among the over 50s, is key to maintaining the UK's productivity, wealth and standard of living.” ”

'Taking Equal Opportunities Seriously. The extension of positive duties to promote equality', by Colm O'Conneide, published by the Equality and Diversity Forum, 2004

“ In Northern Ireland since the introduction of a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity we have seen, among other things: increasing engagement with older people and recognition of their contribution; revisions of age limits for treatment and employment in the health service; and a recommendation that the upper age limit on school crossing patrols be removed. ”

The Equality Commission Northern Ireland



A public duty on age in Northern Ireland led to hot meals-on-wheels being reintroduced

Better Pension Credit in care homes



Pensioners who have saved for their old age and qualify for the savings credit element of Pension Credit are being short-changed if their care home fees are paid for by local authorities.

Rather than receiving up to the maximum savings credit of £15.51 a week, care home residents can only keep up to £4.65 – with local authorities clawing back the rest in charges. Residents are allowed a personal expenses allowance of just £18.10 per week to pay for clothes, toiletries, family presents and other items.

People in care homes who have saved too much to receive savings credit can receive a little of the money from second pensions or savings, but

again the charging rules only allow £4.65 per week as a “savings disregard”.

Age Concern says the situation is unfair. It is campaigning for a reform of the system to allow pensioners eligible for the savings credit element of the Pension Credit to claim all their entitlement, and for those with second pensions or savings to receive the same – the equivalent of £2.22 per day. The charity's Campaigns Project Officer Ray Mitchell explains: “Our main concern is that the rules as they are applied at the moment discriminate against individuals based solely on their residence in a care home. The savings credit element of Pension Credit was designed by the Government to reward people who have made provision for their retirement; it should be irrelevant where they live.

“This rule runs counter to the Government's own stated intention: ‘The Government intends that pensioners in residential care and nursing homes will gain from Pension Credit as other pensioners do’ and Age Concern is calling on it to remove the unfair charging rules.”

Such a change would affect many of the 217,000 older residents in care homes in England – many of whom feel strongly about being left with just £18.10 per week for personal expenses. Allowing residents to keep their savings credit of up to £15.51 per week would stop them being unfairly deprived of up to 70 per cent of their pension credit solely because of where they live.

Age Concern is asking MPs to contact the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to end this injustice and improve life for their constituents living in care homes.

Information

Diary Dates

Thursday 2 December:
Pre-Budget Report

Tuesday 14 December:
APPG on Ageing and Older People meeting on the proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights, 1-2pm, House of Commons (room tbc)
Speaker: Angela Mason, Director, Women and Equality Unit, Department of Trade and Industry

21 December 2004 - 10 January 2005:
House of Commons Christmas Recess

18 December 2004 - 5 January 2005:
House of Lords Christmas Recess

Life-Long Learning

A House of Lords committee has been set up to probe ambitious EU plans for a new life-long learning programme. This would be phased in from 2007 to 2013, with a proposed total budget of 13.62 billion.

The committee is keen to hear from organisations and individuals who have either had direct experience of the Commission's present education and training programmes or those who have views on the new proposals. Written evidence should be submitted by 10 January 2005. For further details contact committee clerk Gordon Baker on 020 7219 6635.

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