

SPEAKING OUT!

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Minority Elders' Committee
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Austerity bites at BME elders

Ellen Lebethe, NPC vice president explains how BME elders have been affected by years of austerity

It is true that all older people look forward to a life of financial security, fulfilment, independence and of being valued for their lifelong contributions to their families, communities and society.

It is also a fact that although we face the same challenges associated with ageing, some face more challenges than others.

Austerity is not working. In fact, it is failing millions across the country.

The impact of the cuts to public services, changes to welfare benefits the underfunding of the NHS, social care and education and zero hours contracts has hit the young, women, the disabled and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) elders the hardest.

Furthermore, Chancellor Phillip Hammond's recent Budget Statement has done little to tackle pensioner and fuel poverty and to rectify the damage done as a result of the restructuring of welfare and other benefits.

This will inevitably lead to the further erosion of standards of living and quality life, an increase in inequality in society and to disquiet among whole communities across the country.

BME elders in general experience challenges over and above the mainstream older population for a number of reasons.

Over a third of BME elders live below the poverty line.

Pensioner and fuel poverty, low pensions, rising cost of living, and poor housing conditions have impacted adversely on their health of BME elders forcing them to use health services more often than others.

Where BME elders have needed social care in care settings or in their homes, their care needs have not always been adequately or appropriately met and carers themselves have not always been aware of support available to them.

Cuts to local authority funding have resulted in services on which BME older people depend being reduced to the bare statutory minimum.

This sadly has led to an increase in loneli-



BME elders have got to be part of the campaign against austerity © NPC

ness and social isolation among BME elders who attend day centres where they are able to socialise, access advice and support, share experiences of the diaspora and cultivate feelings of belonging.

Many BME elders with language constraints who depend on library services for access to essential information, support to develop communication skills and acquire IT skills free have found themselves deprived of these facilities because of the cuts to these services.

BME elders are more likely to occupy social, housing association or rental accommodation.

They often find themselves having to deal with housing officers and at worse greedy, uncooperative landlords to sort out their housing problems often with great difficulty.

At the same time, recent funding and policy trends – from the shift to service commissioning to the 'social cohesion' agenda – have also raised new challenges for the sustainability of BME sector as a whole.

The myth that older people have escaped austerity has been discredited by the num-

ber of older people whose health, welfare and sense of well being have been driven down by the unwelcomed cuts and other measures.

"All pensioners have the right to dignity, independence and security as an integral and valued member of society." (Jack Jones, 1979).

If our aim is to make this a reality, then we need to accept that although older people share the same concerns, hopes and aspirations then the needs and circumstances of the more disadvantaged must be taken on board in our campaigns for dignity, respect and financial security for all in retirement.

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Dementia and BME elders

Mina Rodgers looks at the issue of dementia and how it affects BME elders

Since 2009, the UK has had a National Dementia Strategy.

It uses census data to estimate the number of black and minority ethnic people living with dementia in the UK, and proposes innovative solutions for care.

Dementia is recognised as a worldwide health priority, but research on dementia in general is poorly funded.

Little is known about its relative prevalence in black and minority ethnic populations, although the figures show that there are more than 40,000 older black and minority ethnic (BME) people living with dementia in the UK.

In part, this is due to vascular risk factors such as hypertension often found in African-Caribbean and South Asian UK populations.

In other ethnic groups such as Irish and Jewish, there is a demographically-older population so with the link between age and dementia, prevalence is likely to be higher.

Although the National Dementia Strategy provides strong poli-



There is still a lack of information surrounding the levels of dementia amongst the BME community © NPC

cy recommendations, there is a need to ensure that these are implemented appropriately, and take into account the information and support needs of black and minority ethnic communities.

Prevalence of dementia in some communities in the UK has been significantly underestimated.

Dementia is often misunderstood and highly stigmatised in many UK black and minority ethnic communities.

There's evidence that people from BME communities are not sure where or how to find infor-

mation about dementia. This is exacerbated by language barriers or when people have lost cognitive skills, or if online information is not available in community languages.

People may also confuse the symptoms of dementia with 'normal ageing' and not seek the support that might be available.

That is why access to organisations which can support people in the black and minority ethnic communities is so important, alongside a more developed structure to share the learning from good practice.

Pensioner poverty starts to rise again

The latest government figures show that there were 1.9m pensioners in relative low income After Housing Costs (AHC) in 2015/16, representing 16% of all pensioners.

This figure shows a rise in pensioner poverty in the last year by 300,000 and contradicts the claim that pensioners have escaped austerity.

The Department for Work and Pensions statistics also showed that whilst median pensioner household income was unchanged between 2014/15 and 2015/16, working-age average income grew by around £10 per week.

In 2015/16, working-age average income rose by 2% whilst pensioner average income remained flat.

This clearly contradicts the view that pensioners are doing better than those in work.

The figures also show that those aged 65 and over were more likely than younger age groups to have been in relative low income in at least one out of the last four years.

Campaign on frozen UK state pensions continues

The NPC has stepped up the campaign to end the policy of 'freezing' the UK state pension for over 500,000 pensioners by raising the issue with Commonwealth Commissioners and asking them to put pressure on the government.

At the moment, people retiring to 150 different countries across the globe see their state pension frozen at the level it was on the day they left the UK.

This means that over a period of time, the real value of their state pension begins to fall.

Pensioners in countries such as Australia, Canada, South Africa and most of the Caribbe-

an are all affected.

In response to the NPC's call, a number of Commissioners have said they will now raise the issue with the appropriate minister.

In the meantime, the same issue now faces those UK pensioners living in Europe, following Britain's decision to leave the EU.

Whilst many may think this just affects those well-off, white Brits moving abroad to soak up the sun – it also hits many black and Asian people who have lived and worked in Britain for decades and are now looking to retire.

Racist abuse is on the rise after Brexit vote

Over a third (34%) of black, Asian or minority ethnic people witnessed or experienced racial abuse in the seven months following the Brexit vote in June 2016, according to a new TUC poll.

Over that time, one in five (19%) have suffered or witnessed racial assault, two in five (41%) have heard racist remarks or opinions and one in four (27%) have seen racist graffiti, posters or leaflets.

Claude James, chair of the NPC Minority Elders' Committee said: "The culture of racism is encouraged by some politicians and the media, but it affects us

all and we should help combat racism when people and their communities are under attack."

"Brexit has given racism a new lease of life, and whilst discrimination has never gone away, racism is definitely on the rise as a result of the EU vote."

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