

OLD GREY MATTER ARTICLE

Submitted to the EADT today for publishing December 12th 2015

Wrap up and keep warm!

A headline in the December issue of 'Campaign', the National Pensioner Convention (NPC) monthly bulletin, reads 'Pensioner winter deaths reach 43,900'. You can read it for yourself on the web at www.npcuk.org and also check out NPC's reply to the chancellor's Autumn Statement. The NPC has called on the government to launch a new fuel poverty commission to urgently address the scale of annual winter deaths among the country's older population. The call follows the publication of shocking official figures showing there were an estimated 43,900 excess winter deaths in England and Wales last winter. The figure is the highest number since 1999, with 27% more people dying in the winter months compared with the non-winter months. This is up by 25,700 on the previous year and represents a 140% increase. The majority of deaths occurred among people aged 75 and over; and in total the figures represent 365 deaths a day or 15 deaths an hour, or if projected forwards for twelve years half a million!

The NPC highlighted the scale of winter deaths by staging a black balloon release in various parts of the country in Barnsley, Birmingham, Colchester, Exeter, Milton Keynes, Southampton and Westminster - with all of the events gaining both local and national publicity.

Dot Gibson, NPC general secretary said: "Officials have tried to say that the large increase in winter deaths is due to an ineffective flu vaccine, but even if that were true it only accounts for a third of the increase in these figures." "The truth is many older people are living in poor housing, unable to keep warm and frightened about paying their energy bills. We can't go on every year replaying the same tragic scene; the government should set up a special commission to urgently oversee a programme of insulating homes, building more suitable properties for older people, raising the winter fuel allowance and tackling the excessive profits of the big six energy companies.

However, on the same day these figures were published, the Chancellor was announcing his autumn statement, much heralded by the news media that effectively buried the bad news of excess winter deaths. Unbelievably, the small print states that the Energy Company Obligation Scheme will be scrapped, meaning that the number of homes benefiting from subsidised insulation and more efficient boilers will be halved from 400,000 to 200,000. If this happens my half a million projection of excess winter deaths over twelve years may well come to pass which would indeed be a totally avoidable and sad legacy of present government policy!

Another headline in 'Campaign' was 'Chancellor offers "sticking plaster" on care'. The Chancellor announced that local councils would be able to raise an additional 2% in council tax in order to pay for social care. Since 2010, the sector has suffered £4.6bn worth of cuts since 2010 – and campaigners argue this new plan will be nowhere near enough to address the crisis. Already over one million older people no longer get the help they need at home, staff turnover is high, the quality of care is sometimes questionable and there is a distinct lack of dignity. Some councils in poorer areas will struggle to raise sufficient funds and a wider postcode lottery in care will emerge. Jan Shortt, NPC vice president said: "Anyone associated with the care system will tell you that it simply cannot survive without major reform and all the chancellor has done today is put a sticking plaster over the problem." Despite this gloomy prospect, have a happy Christmas – and keep warm!

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