

Press Release

for immediate release

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Government accused of ageism

“Government at both national and local levels is one of the worst perpetrators of age discrimination, Marion Shoard, the campaigner on behalf of the elderly and author of the eldercare handbook, *A Survival Guide to Later Life*, said today. She warned: “Ageism, unlike homophobia or racial prejudice, has yet to be banished from the heart of our society to the margins of political incorrectness.”

Miss Shoard, who was addressing the Lowdham Book Festival, became interested in care for older people when her mother, already suffering from osteoarthritis and fast losing her eyesight, developed dementia. She wrote *A Survival Guide to Later Life* to help others in the situation in which she found herself. The table of contents and extracts from reviews of this book are attached.

Miss Shoard told the meeting at Lowdham that old people today are in some ways worse off than their grandparents use to be.

“Three-quarters of single people over the age of 65 do not have a car, yet older people without cars have to cope with an environment which in many cases has been built for the car and in which public transport services have declined dramatically. What is more, people now have to travel much further than their forbears to reach basic services, since shops and other facilities have closed in urban and residential areas and moved to out-of-town superstore locations.

Marion Shoard:

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"Many of the public facilities which public authorities saw it as their civic duty to provide in the past, like comfortable seating, drinking fountains, bus shelters and public conveniences, have been fast disappearing, and this is very bad news when you are older. Over the last 20 years, more than half of public lavatories in England and Wales have been closed, and the government has refused to force local authorities to provide them. Yet changes to the kidneys and bladder mean that older people need to use the lavatory more often than younger people, while 3 million Britons, the vast majority of them elderly, are incontinent.

"Our muscles decline in strength from the age of 30; although this may not be apparent at 50, by the age of 80 many people cannot rise unaided from a bench. Others have to cope with chronic conditions like osteo-arthritis or lung disease, which can make walking or even standing difficult. But seating too has been disappearing from streets and public places like railway stations.

Where new seating is provided, say in new out-of-town shopping malls, it is often in the form of backless benches, lacking the arm supports which would enable elderly people to rise up and down."

Miss Shoard said that the National Health Service is fundamentally ageist.

"During the last part of the 20th century, nearly two-thirds of long-stay geriatric NHS beds were simply taken away -- 50,600 between 1987 and 2001. Yet the number of people who needed such beds was not dropping at all -- it was rising. Think what the public outcry would be if the beds involved were maternity!"

Miss Shoard said that the government also cheats elderly people of free care by defining much of the help they need (for instance, in washing, dressing, managing continence and moving around) as a result of disability and illness not as "health care", which supposedly remains free, but as "social care", which does not. Individuals are charged for what is deemed social care in complicated ways which vary from local authority to local authority but are rarely generous. "While health care is free to all, the social care system is means-tested. So when you become so frail that you need to go into a care home, you have to foot the bill yourself if you have savings - including the value of any property you own - which exceed £20,500.

"A far larger proportion of older people are likely to need care-home support because a far larger proportion of them encounter long-term illness and disability than younger adults. That of course is not ageism -- it is simply a fact of life. But on top of this the state chooses to provide extra financial help for disabled people under the age of 65 so they can avoid having to go into a care home if they do not wish to do so.

"Thus up to £420 per week provided under the Independent Living Fund to help people of modest means who need a large amount of help to maintain an independent life is not available to anybody over the age of 65. Nor can you obtain a special mobility payment of up to £42.30 per week, which younger people receive as the mobility component of Disabled Living Allowance once you have passed your 66th birthday. In denying older citizens this payment alone, the government is effectively saying that it expects older disabled and frail people to remain within their own four walls and not participate as ordinary citizens in the world outside."

Miss Shoard continued: "To add insult to injury, when elderly people sell their homes to pay care home bills, they often not only have to pay their own bills, but also help relieve the state of the burden of paying the bills of poorer residents. This is because the fees which a care home charges to these so-called self-funders are often higher than the fees it charges social services for its placements. Self-funders can pay between £100 and £300 a week more for a place in a care home than social services departments pay.

"Outside this area, there is no other part of the welfare state which expects a particular group of citizens to save the state a financial burden it would otherwise have to bear."

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Notes for editors

The Lowdham Book Festival event at which Marion Shoard will be making the above speech will take place at 2 p.m. on July 11 at the Festival Marquee, Village Hall, Main Street, Lowdham, Nottinghamshire. The scope of her book *A Survival Guide to Later Life* and extracts from reviews are appended, together with an article from *The Sunday Telegraph* which explains her personal story of involvement in this field.

Before she became involved in older people' issues, Marion Shoard wrote and campaigned about access to the countryside. She is talking about her award-winning book *A Right to Roam* at the Lowdham Book Festival at 7.30 p.m. on July 11 at the Methodist Chapel, Main Street, Lowdham.

Tickets for Lowdham Book Festival events can be obtained by telephoning 0115 966 4143.