



**Help the Aged**

## **National Identity Cards – A Help or Hindrance?**

The Government has announced a proposal to gradually introduce, a national identity card. The card itself will be credit card size, containing a chip which can be scanned to reveal information about the individual. As the cards are issued, a National Identity Register will be set up, recording identity information and also linking information about the individual from different Government departments. It is not clear the extent of information which will be stored on this database. For security, it will also include one or several biometric characters, which are unique identifying physical characteristics, for example, iris patterns and finger prints. It will also record whenever the card is scanned by public or private services. This will leave biographic footprints making it more difficult to forge.

The Government plans to introduce it in two stages. The first stage, planned for 2007/2008, is the introduction of a voluntary ID card for UK citizens and a mandatory biometric identity document for foreign nationals coming to stay in the country for more than 3 months. The second stage, to be introduced when the conditions are right, is to move to a compulsory card scheme, in which it would be compulsory to have a card but not to carry one, and to produce this card to access public services in ways defined by those services.

The Government states that the legislation will allow public and private services to establish the identity of an individual with the consent of the card holder, but data held on the National Identity Register will only be basic identity information, such as name, address, date of birth, gender, immigration status and confirmed biometric markers. Organisations using the National Identity Register will not be able to obtain other information, for example, health or tax records.

This will all come at a price. The Government estimates that it will cost between £1 640 million and £3 145 million depending on the complexity of the card, over 13 year period. We will also have to pay for the privilege of obtaining the card. A 10 year plain identity card is estimated to cost £35, with subsidised rates planned for those on low incomes.

The Government has stressed, that the introduction of national identity cards is increasingly necessary to tackle: illegal migration and working, organised crime and terrorism, identity theft and fraud, and fraudulent access to public services. However, not everyone shares the Government's enthusiasm. As Simon Davies, Director of Privacy International, states, concerns fall into two main categories: those based on practical considerations and those based on privacy and civil rights. For example, there is doubt whether the introduction

of these cards will have a great impact on tackling crime and terrorism, and that the money would be better spent elsewhere. There is also concern about how secure this database would be, and whether in the future, individuals will lose complete control over what information the Government holds about them. This is only scratching the surface on a vast and complex issue, and we would be very interested to hear your own opinion on the subject.