

NEWS



Eddie O'Hara, who was awarded an BEM in the Queen's New Year Honours list, Birmingham centre

Social work activist honoured for challenging civic leaders

A social worker and activist who set up a charity calling on civic leaders to do more to improve the lives of children in his city was among those receiving the Queen's New Year Honours.

Eddie O'Hara, founder of All Birmingham's Children (ABC), was awarded a British Empire Medal for his work with the charity and more than 30 years working in children's services.

The award came just before publication of his book – *Birmingham's Children: A Tale of Two Cities* – highlighting the contrasting fortunes of Birmingham's young.

The campaigning charity plans to send the book to all civic, business, educational and community leaders in the city as part of a mission to hold them to account.

Eddie co-founded ABC out of a growing sense of outrage at persistently high levels of child poverty and soaring use of food banks in Britain's second biggest city, which is due to host the Commonwealth Games this year.

He said: "I can't understand why we are spending so much money on the Commonwealth Games when 32-54 per cent of our children are living in poverty and many of the city's much-needed public services are decaying.

"For some children and families, life is relatively fantastic. The city is becoming wealthier year-on-year. But year-on-year the amount of people who are poor, disempowered and don't get access to things is also growing."

The idea behind ABC was to work with civic and

community leaders to make Birmingham a more child-friendly place. But despite initial interest, Eddie says he came up against a lack of political will, vested interests and what he describes as lingering Victorian concepts of "deserving and undeserving poor".

"What shocked me and continues to shock me is the siege mentality from some of our leaders. That there exists a stranglehold which the main political parties have over debates, which are about wanting to win elections and arguing with each other rather than governing a city for the benefit of all. That process takes up a lot of time and mostly results in not a lot happening."

Eddie believes part of the problem is due to a cosy cohort of people at the top tables preventing the voices of the most marginalised from being heard.

"There are vested reputational interests in not being negative about the services the city provides.

"In many ways it is a moral campaign. I think as a community we are still treading the well-worn Victorian path of viewing poor people as being 'feckless' and 'underserving'."

Also given an MBE was Laurence 'Zac' McBreen, recognised in 2019 BASW Cymru's Social Work Awards for lifetime achievement.

In a career of almost half-a-century, he has been a practice teacher and assessor to more than 500 students. Speaking to *PSW* in 2019, Laurence claimed he hardly ever felt stressed in social work, which he put down to "having a rationale for what you are doing" rather than "just following orders".

Search New Years Honours on BASW's website for full list

Lords reject bid to restrict the right to protest

A UK government bid to put restrictions on protests was rejected by the House of Lords.

Peers voted in favour of a Labour-led move that scraps the power to impose conditions on protest marches judged to be too noisy as outlined in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

They also backed a Liberal Democrat amendment that stripped out the power to impose conditions on protests on noise grounds.

BASW and SWU opposed the bill, recently sending a letter to the shadow home secretary stating: "This bill will undermine and remove many important rights to protest and in doing so, bring many people into the ambit of serious, disproportionate criminal charges."

BASW and SWU are still opposing measures which give police powers to tackle unauthorised encampments, threatening the way of life of Gypsy and Traveller communities.

MPs and peers slam asylum reform bill

A cross-party group of MPs and peers has found asylum reforms in the Nationality and Borders Bill "fail to meet the UK's human rights obligations". They criticised plans to "penalise" asylum seekers travelling via unofficial routes as "inconsistent with the Refugee Convention". Lowering the benefit of doubt threshold in age assessments breached children's rights, they said.