

Man denies having drug

● A MAN has denied possessing a Class A drug. Gavin Bennett, 25, is alleged to have been found with 167mg of cocaine in Southend on August 29 last year. Bennett, of Kendrick Avenue, Birmingham, pleaded not guilty to possessing drugs when he appeared at Basildon Magistrates' Court. He was bailed to appear at Basildon Crown Court in February.

Burglars get £5k haul

● POSSESSIONS worth £5,000 were stolen by burglars. Crooks forced the front door of a house in Furlongs, Vange, and stole a handbag, a purse containing £50, credit cards, a sat nav, a mobile phone and a camera. Witnesses to the break-in last Monday night, can call Pitsea CID on 0300 3334444 or Crimstoppers on 0800 555111.

Trade in your old boiler

● PEOPLE are being reminded they can get cash help if they trade in their old boiler for a new energy-efficient model. Taking advantage of the Government's scrappage scheme, could reduce fuel bills by £200 a year. Visit www.boilerscrappage.co.uk

● YOBs set light to a car in Chichester Close, Pitsea. The vehicle, worth £2,000, was destroyed.

CAUGHT IN A

Grandparents tell of struggle to bring up a baby on benefits

A NEW year is a time of optimism and hope. Most of us are keeping our fingers crossed for a healthy and prosperous 2010.

But for the Fry family, from Southend, having enough money to buy clothes for the grandson they lovingly look after will be enough. Living on just over £30 a week between them after paying their bills and rent, Phillip and Helen Fry and grandson Blade have been dependent on the kindness of friends for clothes, and even food. And the Frys are far from an isolated case in the town. A recent report by the Government's Audit Commission found the town has a high number of children living in poverty.

Southend's councillor responsible for children, Roger Hadley, declared tackling poverty would be one of the council's top priorities this year.

Mr Hadley also spoke of a "benefits culture" in the most deprived areas of the town, where generations of the same family have never worked.

Government figures show almost a quarter of children in Southend live in low-income households, compared with an East of England average of 16 per cent.

In poverty blackspots unemployment is typically high, more people suffer from poor health and a lack of education.

Often, poverty afflicts those who,

“When we first brought Blade home, we had nothing. Our friends bought him clothes



■ Giving support – councillor Blaine Robin speaks to Helen and Phillip Fry with volunteer helper Sylvia Hallett
Picture: AL UNDERWOOD YPMLS_05

By JOHN GEOGHEGAN
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usually for health or parenthood reasons, are unable to work.

Phillip, 55, and Helen, 51, a proud couple, look after 14-month-old Blade in their two-bedroom flat in a tower block on the Woodgrange Estate.

Phillip suffers from spondylitis – a debilitating spinal condition – and diabetes, and has been unable to work for about 20 years. Helen has endured a brain aneurism and depression, and now looks after Blade full-time.

The couple are happy with the flat provided by Estuary Housing, but are having problems receiving all their benefits since they started looking after Blade in April.

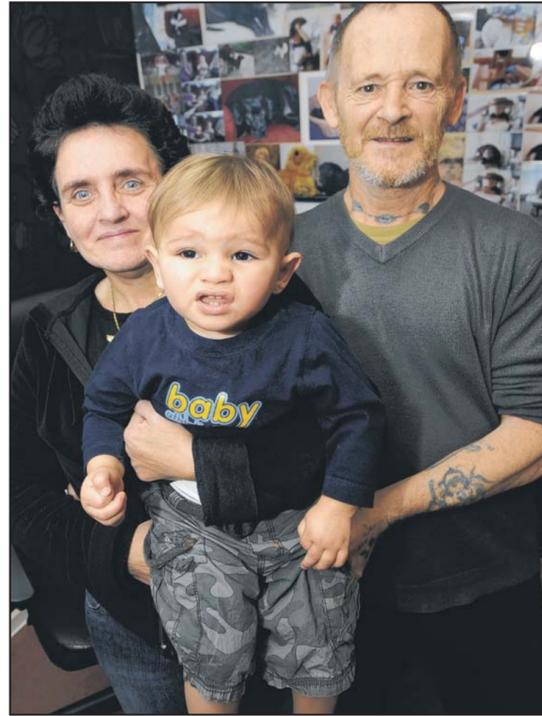
At the moment, they are living on £76 of housing and incapacity benefit a week, but are still trying to claim child benefits and a further allowance for being guardians. They also struggle to pay their monthly bills, which come to £100 in total, plus £10 a week in rent.

Unable to afford clothes for Blade, they have had to depend on donations from friends and the Freecycle website, where people give away their unwanted items.

Thanks to Southend Council's social services, they recently received a one-off payment of £500, but this is not going to last forever.

Helen said: "I don't like asking for money. But when we first brought Blade home, we had nothing. Our friends brought him clothes and within 24 hours, we had a cot and a pram."

Phillip, who used to be a roofer, painter and decorator, said: "Without their help, we would have sunk. I would love to go out and work, but I don't think there's anyone out there who would employ



■ We are family – but Helen and Phillip Fry struggle financially bringing up their young grandson, Blade
Picture: AL UNDERWOOD YPMLS_02

me. They do believe in keeping the poor poor."

The pair were driven further into debt when they had to pay back about £2,000 in benefits they were over-awarded a few years ago.

They have even cut off their central heating to save much-needed cash. Phillip said: "We rely on heaters in the front room and the bedroom."

Tory councillor Blaine Robin, who represents Kursaal ward where the family live, has been trying to help the Frys by writing to the Government about their difficulty in claiming benefits.

He said: "People here want to be independent, to stand on their own two feet. They simply want the support they're entitled to."

According to Mr Robin, the Woodgrange Estate is one of the most deprived areas of Southend. Its poverty levels, in terms of income and health, rank among the worst in the country. "People living here are more likely to die about eight to ten years earlier than in neighbouring areas," he added.

Mr Robin has also been helping another family in Southchurch who are worried about eviction from their privately-rented property. The single mum-offive is struggling to pay the rent while providing full-time care for her 12-year-old son, who has brain damage.

The woman, who did not wish to be named, said after her partner died overseas in 2006, she lost all her UK benefits because the family

“I don't think anyone would employ me. They do believe in keeping the poor poor

remained abroad for several months. She said: "Me and three of the children were surviving on £48 a week. We just had to use it for food. When the council tax kicked in, I couldn't pay and was taken to court. It was very tough, but we had to sit it out."

The woman, who now only lives with her disabled son, gets about £170 a week, but has found the whole system highly confusing and difficult to access.

She said: "I have to pay £120 a month rent, which I don't have. "I physically can't work because of my son. I can't even leave the house for an hour. We have to go to charities to get his equipment."

She also has to put up with poor living conditions in her four-bedroom house, and said two of the bedrooms are in such a poor state they are uninhabitable.

She showed the Echo holes in the wall of the upstairs bathroom, and dry rot and mould in other rooms following leaks. The woman said: "I'm living in a hovel. It's a health hazard, and the house is not adapted to my son's needs. "I'm getting less money, but having to pay more rent."

POVERTY TRAP



■ Sustenance for all – volunteer John Hailes and Leanne Richardson at the Storehouse project, giving out food last year

Stark rise in number of food parcels being given to needy

ONE man who works on the frontline fighting poverty in Southend is Simon Matthews.

Community pastor at Southend Vineyard, Simon runs the Storehouse project, which offers clothes, food parcels, tea, coffee and meals to people in need.

The project, based at the Coleman Street Community Centre, has seen the number of people turning up rocket

“Out of the 1,200 clients we have got, about 150 are single mums who come for breakfast

from just 200 a year to 1,200 in 2009. And it is not just those sleeping rough who make use of its vital services.

Mr Matthews said: "Out of the 1,200 clients we have got, about 150 are single mums who come in for breakfast and food bags every week."

"There's been a huge increase, but we don't discriminate about who comes in and gets a food bag."

"And about 350 of that total are unofficially homeless."

"A high percentage have mental health issues or drug addictions."

"We also see victims of domestic violence, boys as well as women."

Most of the money for the project comes from church

donations plus voluntary grants from Southend Council.

In the past year, the number of food parcels given out has leapt from about 75 a month to between 250 and 300, and the number of volunteers has gone up from eight to more than 40.

As well as providing help with things like food and clothing, the Storehouse also works with groups which provide support to people in need.

Mr Matthews added: "If we didn't feed these people, they wouldn't starve, but they are poor in that they are extremely vulnerable."

"They have no support network, and are not engaging with the services they're entitled to."

"Council leader, Nigel Holdercroft, came to visit us and he said we are stopping people from falling through the net, which highlights the great need for the service."

"But we do need a fundraiser desperately."

The project also wants more volunteers to come forward to help with fundraising and helping out. If you can help, call Southend Vineyard on 01702 612900.

“These people have no support network and are not engaging with services

THE LIVES OF SOUTHEND'S POOR

- Government figures show in Southend, 7,345 under-15s live in poverty, which is defined as households earning less than 60 per cent of the UK's annual average income of £26,020
- This means just under 24 per cent of children live in poverty, compared to an average of 22 per cent for the UK as a whole
- 3,805 children in Southend are eligible to claim free school meals, about 14 per cent of the total, but among primary school youngsters this rises to 18 per cent
- According to the Eastern Region Public Health Observatory, Southend is rated "significantly worse" than the regional average for the number of obese children, the number of teenage pregnancies and hospital stays for drug and alcohol abuse among young people
- The three wards in Southend with the highest levels of child poverty are Milton, Victoria and Kursaal wards
- Four million children live in poverty in the UK, one of the worst rates among developed countries
- The Audit Commission said Southend has the lowest life expectancy in wider Essex, but child poverty in the town is being tackled, through things like the Children and Young People's plan