

Call to close sect's benefit loophole

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Religious Affairs Editor

LABOUR has urged the Government to plug a loophole in housing benefit which Britain's richest and fastest growing Buddhist sect has exploited to fund the purchase of a series of substantial properties.

Chris Smith, the shadow social security spokesman, urged an immediate investigation into the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), a Buddhist sect set up in 1991 which now has over 20 affiliated residential centres. Former members claim that the majority of the 300-odd residential members are on housing benefit, which is paid in rent to the centres to fund their mortgages.

The Department of Social Security is effectively subsidising the NKT's expansion to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Mr Smith said: "There must be an immediate investigation. If there is a loophole, the Government should plug

it as rapidly as possible." Meanwhile, members of the NKT are involved in a series of demonstrations as the Dalai Lama arrives in Europe today ahead of his arrival in Britain on Monday. Coachloads are leaving from the NKT's headquarters near Ulverston, Cumbria, to attend a demonstration organised by the Shugden Supporters Community in Zurich.

The demonstrators — they claim that the Dalai Lama oppresses religious freedom because he has banned a centuries-old spiritual practice — are also planning to picket the Buddhist Society in London on Tuesday.

Organisers of the Dalai Lama's UK visit are increasingly anxious about the possibility of disruption from the activities of the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC).

The Tibet government in exile has vigorously denied the allegations against the Dalai Lama as "baseless."

More details have emerged following the Guardian's investigation, published last week, of how NKT-affiliated residential centres use the benefit system.

Early next month, the NKT headquarters at Conishead

than 1,500 followers, likely generate a surplus of well over £100,000.

Former members of the NKT have come forward to claim that nearly all the approximately 90 residents of Conishead Priory are on housing benefit, which they pay for rent. With rents of £160-£190 a month, this amounts to the Department of Social Security paying out more than £13,000 a month in benefits. Ex-NKT members claim this pattern duplicated at many centres affiliated to the NKT.

Conishead Priory has developed another source of income during the festival, held three times a year. Residents have to leave the room for which they receive a benefit to make way for paying guests.

Chris Bussell had been a monk in the NKT at Ulverston for two years before leaving last year.

Ultimately Mr Bussell said he was receiving money was not entitled to. The founder of the NKT is a self-proclaimed reclusive Tibetan monk called Geshe Kelsang. Bussell decided to hand in his vows and wrote a letter explaining to Kelsang.



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