

Wales: A Good Place to Grow Old?

Opening Comments

Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk to you today. It is a privilege to address groups that represent 650,000 older people in Wales, just as it has been a privilege to have worked with Age Alliance Wales.

I'm going to talk about the report we have written for Age Alliance Wales. Its title is 'Wales: a Good Place to Grow Old.'

But there is one bit of that title that is more important than the other 7 words – and that is the question mark at the end. It should be the biggest, boldest, most obvious bit of the report: Wales: a Good Place to Grow Old **QUESTION MARK.**

Behind the squiggle of the question mark are all the vast and varied experiences of Wales's 650,000 older people.

Some of them are good experiences – and there is no doubt that many aspects of older people's lives have got better.

But some of the experiences are not so good – and it is national disgrace that public bodies, and society in general, serve older people so badly.

It is a matter of justice – of fairness and equality – that older people get a decent quality of life. It is not a plea for special treatment or for favours, but a simple expectation that older people are treated with decency and dignity, and that public services serve the older public.

About the Bevan Foundation

It was because of the Bevan Foundation's commitment to fairness and justice that AAW asked us to work on this report.

Who we are.

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Unprecedented Times

2010 was a landmark year.

Many things happened – as a reminder:

- David Cameron became prime minister in general election
- Miners trapped underground in Chile were rescued
- Cloud of volcanic ash brought air travel to a halt
- And the number of older people in Wales exceed the number of children for the first time ever.

And if that is not enough, in the next 25 years, the number of older people is set to increase even further – by 2035, more than a quarter of the Welsh population will be over 65.

Older people are the future.

For many older people, later life brings enormous satisfaction. With enough money and plentiful leisure time, older people can pursue their hobbies, be it sewing or sky-diving, and achieve some extraordinary things both for themselves and for others.

From Dilys Price to Joan Bakewell, to Mrs Jones and Mr Thomas,

older people are showing that there's much more to older life than stereotypes of slippers and zimmer frames.

But not all older people are able to have the time of their lives when they reach 65. As we will see, low incomes, ill-health and poor services can come together to create tough times for those over 65.

The Welsh Government has made addressing the needs of older people a priority. Wales was the first country in the UK to have an Older People's Commissioner and it has a National Partnership Forum for older people. There are more strategies and plans than you can shake a stick at.

But this is not enough – there is too little action on the ground.

It's time for change.

In this report, Age Alliance Wales challenges the Welsh Government, local authorities, health boards and other agencies to take action to make a measurable and identifiable difference to people's lives. The report identifies 6 ways that AAW will measure progress – and if there is none, we will want to know

why.

This is tough talk – as demanded by tough times – and there must be no excuses.

The report highlights 3 keys areas where Age Alliance Wales is calling for action:

- longer, healthier lives
- independent and fulfilling lives
- learning in older life.

I will look at each one of these in turn.

Living Longer, Healthier Lives

One of the most important issues is lives that are not only longer but healthier.

Six out of ten people aged 65 or over say their health is good or better – that's great news. But it means that four out of ten DO NOT have good health – not so good.

There is a mountain of evidence to show that prevention and early intervention improve the health, wellbeing and independence of older people. It not only helps to reduce or delay the need for higher intensity care, it can enhance people's quality of life. Joints are kept mobile, diabetes is kept at bay, minds are kept active.

So when we know that prevention and early intervention is so good is this what we do? Simple answer - no. Or rather – not as much as we should.

Healthy lifestyles

A healthy lifestyle both before and during older age can reduce

the risks of ill health in older age.

The most common illnesses amongst older people – high blood pressure, arthritis and respiratory illness – are mostly strongly associated with unhealthy lifestyles.

Older people are – perhaps surprisingly – not very good at living healthy lifestyles.

Two-thirds eat fewer than 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day and only 4 out of ten are physically active.

And as for drinking and smoking - more than a quarter drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol and one in six smoke. While we all know someone who has drunk 5 pints and smoked 20 Woodbines and lived to the age of 90, that is the **rare exception.**

So, AAW wants public bodies in Wales to plan what they are going to do to improve the health of older people, to help and support older people to live healthy lifestyles and get help when they need it.

Early Intervention

And when things do go wrong, early intervention can dramatically improve older people's wellbeing. Services include low level services such as lunch clubs to more formal preventive initiatives such as hospital discharge and rapid response services.

Early intervention services can reduce the need for older people to attend Accident and Emergency – and with long waits for ambulances and in A&E departments who wants to go there?

They can reduce the need to stay overnight in hospital, because something is more easily treated.

And they can reduce the need for occupational therapy or physiotherapy – which saves time, inconvenience and money.

Crucially, early intervention can delay or reduce the need for residential care.

It's worth highlighting an extract from a letter sent to a sitting service for carers:

Thank you all for the kindness and help given to both my mother and myself. Without it my mother would not have been able to stay in her home for as long as she did. ... I know my mother enjoyed the evenings talking about her earlier life, it made her feel safe and comfortable.”

“The day centre visits on a Thursday and the Wednesday evening sitter service are invaluable in helping Mum live a fuller and active life. We can’t thank you enough.”

And if all that is not enough, early intervention services make good financial sense too. A large study of services in England found that every extra £1 spent on early intervention services can generate £1.20’s worth of savings. That’s a fantastic rate of return on spending alone – let alone what it does for people’s lives.

So increasing the provision of early intervention services and re-ablement services is a key demand of AAW, along with reducing the use of residential care.

Dignity and Respect

Too many people receiving health and social care services say that they are treated without dignity or respect.

Poor attitudes and behaviour can range from lack of courtesy or lack of privacy to, at its extreme, verbal or physical abuse. Sadly more than 3,000 older people in Wales said they were victims of abuse in 2009/10.

Just as shocking is the lack of confidence that people have in our health and social care services. The Older People's Commissioner found that only 36 per cent of people in Wales are confident that an older person would be treated with dignity in hospital. That means that two-thirds of people think that when an older person goes to hospital he or she is NOT going to receive dignified care.

Thankfully the Welsh Government and many health boards have responded to the disgraceful findings – but there is still much work to be done.

Age Alliance Wales is therefore calling for training in dignity and respect to be mandatory for health and social care staff.

2. Living Independent, Fulfilling Lives

Contrary to stereotypes, the vast majority of older people lead active, independent lives with no support from social services, care agencies, friends or family.

But sometimes older people do need help to cope with everyday tasks, because of physical and / or mental health conditions.

Help with living at home, can enable older people to live independently and have a fulfilling life. That help can be from the state, third sector, private sector or as is often the case, from family and friends.

Too often there is a gap in care when an older person is discharged from hospital.

There are all sorts of hurdles to overcome. Assessments of care needs often take far too long, there may be difficulties getting home care services in place, and there may be inadequate support for carers.

We know that these services are already under severe pressure – the number of hours of home care per client is being squeezed,

carers do not get assessments or support for example.

The consequence of these difficulties are well known – that terrible phrase “delayed transfers of care” or even worse, “bed-blocking”.

Delayed transfers of care are not good for anyone – the patient, the care provider or the NHS budget. This is why AAW is calling for a significant reduction in the rate of DTOC.

Financial Inclusion

The other aspect of living independent fulfilling lives is rather different – it’s about money.

Like it or not, money matters.

Many older people have been affected by poor-performing pension funds and low interest rates on savings, while a third of pensioners miss out on Pension Credit to top up their incomes.

As a result, one in five older people (about 100,000 people) have incomes below the poverty threshold.

This DOESN'T mean older people are starving and don't have a roof over their heads. But it does mean that they have incomes that are substantially below the average for their type of household. And that means they can't afford many of the things that the average household takes for granted.

Even though older people are better at budgeting, saving and avoiding debt than younger people, it's hardly surprising that a third of people over the age of 50 say they struggle from time to time to pay bills.ⁱ The cost of gas and electricity, and of food prices, are of particular concern.

As they feel the squeeze, increasing numbers of older people are seeking help from advice agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureaux for a range of money, benefit and debt-related problems.

Example of Mrs June Smith:

June Smith, aged 78

Mrs. Smith contacted Care & Repair as she was concerned about her bay window and chimney stack. Care & Repair helped her to get the repairs done, and also arranged for hand rails to be fitted in her bathroom and stairs and referred her for help to install central heating and loft insulation.

A benefits check showed Mrs. Smith was entitled to additional benefits, including higher rate Attendance Allowance and a back payment of £402, Council Tax Benefit and Pension Credits.

Because of the difficult financial circumstances of many older people, AAW is calling for better access to advice services.

Concessionary Travel

The third aspect of independent living that I want to explore is getting about – and in particular getting about on the bus.

The Welsh concessionary fares scheme has been a boon to older people - 92 per cent of older people say their concessionary bus pass maintains their independence and 81 per cent say their quality of life would suffer without it.

Their bus pass gives them independence to carry out essential tasks such as shopping or attending hospital as well as the opportunity for days out and socialising.

But thousands of older people miss out because they don't have a bus service they can use. 1 in 3 older people live more than a 6 minute walk away from a bus stop. And thousands have no bus at all. For people without a bus service community transport can be a lifeline – but they can't use their pass on these kinds of services.

AAW is therefore calling for the concessionary fares scheme to be extended to CT services in Wales.

3. Learning in Older Life

The last area I want to talk about is learning.

Rapid social and technological changes mean it's all the more important that older people acquire new skills. There is hardly an area of life that has not been changed in some way. The internet, mobile phones, sudoku, curries, Tai Chi, central heating, rap music, chip-and-pin – they're all now commonplace yet were almost unheard of 25 years ago.

Older people need to keep learning to get the most out of life and not be left on the sidelines. Whether it's managing money, learning new technology or learning about current affairs – older people **have** to be able to keep up to date.

And learning is also great for keeping older minds active and for socializing too.

Quote from Patricia Baynes

Patricia is 84. She's learnt computing. She said

'My life has changed!'

'Only last week I was sending my 90 year old sister a bunch of flowers that I brought on the internet, which were being delivered the next day complete with a card that I designed on the computer. It seems limitless!

The difference a couple of online courses made to my life is astounding. It's opened doors that I never knew were there!

I only hope that others get to realise that the opportunities to broaden horizons are available to everyone, regardless of age or location. From starting with a laptop, I've entered into this modern world and actually now think of these things as my friends not my enemies.

Life is certainly more interesting and not half as lonely."

Yet if we look at the evidence on learning you wouldn't think it was such a good thing.

People over 50 years old are less likely to have qualifications and are more likely to lack literacy and numeracy skills than younger age groups.

Older people are less likely to participate in learning than most younger age groups. Worst of all participation in learning has fallen steeply in recent years. There are a third fewer people over 50 years of age participating in further education and other community learning now than in 2005/06.

AAW is calling for

- Action to increase participation of older people in learning
- Provision of learning opportunities in core skills, such as literacy, numeracy, healthy living and employment-related skills.

Digital Inclusion

Access to the internet is said to be as important as access to utilities such as electricity and gas.

The internet provides information, ability to complete transactions, entertainment and social contact –those without access to the internet are at an ever-increasing disadvantage.

Yet older people are the least likely of all groups of people to use the internet – although plenty are keen to learn! About two thirds of people aged 65-79 did not use the internet in 2008, more than twice the proportion of all other age groups. Digital exclusion increases rapidly with age – amongst people over 80 years old, only 12 per cent used the internet.ⁱⁱ

Age Alliance Wales is calling for Accessible learning in digital skills, and promotion and exchange of good practice.

The Challenge Ahead

Too many older people in Wales face lives in poverty, with inadequate social care and limited social engagement. Age Alliance Wales calls on the Welsh Government, local authorities, health boards and other agencies to take urgent action to fulfill their pledges to equality and social justice for older people.

It's not a matter of bad luck or lack of hard work that mean times are tough for older people. It's a reflection of a society that doesn't value older people, and that doesn't listen to their needs.

With the number of older people is set to increase dramatically in coming years, nobody can be complacent. Without action, the prospects for older people look grim.

This is not just important for the current generations of older people, but also for those now in their forties and fifties who will reach older age shortly.

Age Alliance Wales recognises the pressures on the public purse and the demands on many working in the public and third sector.

But many of the actions we are urging not only improve lives but save money in the long term.

We do not want more fine words, more policies or strategies. We want action at the front-line, to improve services for older people and thereby improve their quality of life.

We will measure the Welsh Government, local authorities and health boards against 6 key achievements:

- A reduction in the **number** of older people living in poverty.
- A reduction in elder abuse.
- A reduction in the percentage of older people (aged 75 and over) experiencing delayed transfers of care.
- An increase in the proportion of older people participating in community learning.
- An increase in the proportion of older people, especially people in the oldest age groups, who use the internet.
- An increase in those receiving early intervention services.

But just as important as all the statistics are what life is like for the 650,000 older people. It is YOUR life, YOUR experiences, YOUR wellbeing that are at the heart of the Age Alliance Wales's work and at the centre of this report.

If this report helps to make a difference then we will have done our job.

I sincerely hope that in a few years time if someone writes – Wales: A Good Place to Grow Old **Question Mark** – that there will be no doubt about the answer. It will be a resounding YES!

Thank you very much – wish conference well.
