

Public Policy Statement
The built environment in communities
May 2016

Summary

Being able to take part in community life, with good access to local services and facilities, is a lifeline for many older people. If an older person cannot get out and about locally they are at risk of poor health, less social contact with others and a reduced quality of life overall. There are already high levels of loneliness and social isolation amongst older people in Wales and an inaccessible built environment that deters people from taking part in community life can contribute to this.

The features that make a place desirable to live in can change as people get older. It is essential that the built environment in communities is designed and adapted in an age friendly way so that it is sustainable and suitable for people of all ages.

An age friendly community is one that has the capacity to support older people to enjoy the best possible quality of life. It includes facilities, services and amenities that are accessible and that accommodate the needs of older people to help them enjoy health and wellbeing and to fully participate in society.

It is vital that the built environment enables, rather than prevents, older people taking an active part in their communities. Barriers in the built environment can exclude older people from becoming fully inclusive members of society. These can include:

- physical access problems for people with mobility impairments such as steps, and access for wheelchairs and mobility scooters;
- pavements in a poor condition, car parking on pavements, and street 'clutter', which can be hazardous for older people and can inhibit access and pose an increased falls risk
- inadequate street lighting, which can impose an unacceptable restriction on many older people due to fear of their physical and social environments;
- a lack of seating in public spaces – accessing community areas and facilities can present a substantial challenge for older people if there is nowhere to rest or to sit down;
- a lack of public toilets – adequate public toilet provision is vital to enable older people to maintain their dignity and participate in community life;
- a lack of places to meet in the community, which can increase social isolation;
- reductions in the number of facilities such as public libraries.

The design of our built environment reflects and impacts on attitudes to ageing. Older people can play a vitally important role in their local communities as contributors, consumers and service users, as long as certain basic needs are met. Safe and accessible streets, places to meet to socialise, and adequate public seating and toilets all help to facilitate this.

Increasing opportunities for older people to take part locally can do much to boost independence, combat social isolation and loneliness and promote health and wellbeing.

All local authorities in Wales have signed up to the Dublin Declaration, showing commitment at local levels to creating communities that are inclusive and supportive for all, regardless of their age.¹ Each local authority in Wales has submitted a local plan outlining the action they will take over the next three years to deliver Ageing Well priorities.²

Improvements to communities and services are needed in all areas of Wales. Local authorities have a key role in making sure that the built environment in public spaces and streets in communities is safe and inclusive. With local authorities facing budget cutbacks, many of the essential services and facilities that older people rely on are under threat.

Politicians at all levels must pay close attention to the impact that proposed cuts will have on older people. Local authorities must conduct meaningful equality impact assessments to ensure that cuts and changes to services and facilities are not having a disproportionate effect on older people. Decisions about changes to services and facilities must take older people's needs into account through effective engagement and consultation. The cumulative effect of cuts to essential facilities and amenities can incrementally erode the infrastructure of the built environment and take the heart out of our communities.

We acknowledge the significant financial challenges facing local authorities and public bodies in Wales. However, we believe that maintaining facilities to provide an inclusive age friendly built environment, and protecting essential amenities and services to enable the participation of older people in communities, could bring savings in terms of limiting demands and reliance on health and social care budgets.

Summary of public policy proposals

- The application of the principles of the Dublin Declaration and the implementation of Ageing Well Plans by local authorities in Wales must be robustly monitored and evaluated.
- Local authorities must conduct meaningful equality impact assessments on their budget decisions to ensure that cuts and changes to services and facilities are not having a disproportionate effect on older people.
- Decisions about changes to services and facilities must take older people's needs into account through effective engagement and consultation.

¹ Ageing Well in Wales. Age-Friendly Communities. <http://www.ageingwellinwales.com/en/themes/age-friendly-communities>

² Ageing Well in Wales. Ageing Well in Wales Achievements and Forward Looking. <http://www.ageingwellinwales.com/Libraries/Documents/AW-Ph1-Achievements-Ph2-Forward-Look.pdf>

- Local authorities must ensure that streets are safe and accessible, with good lighting. Pedestrian crossings must allow sufficient time to cross roads, signage should be easily visible, and pavements must be well maintained and be free of obstruction.
- Local authorities must review public places and spaces and provide reasonable adjustments as required by the Equality Act 2010.
- Local authorities must ensure that older people's needs are taken into account in providing adequate and appropriate seating in communities.
- Welsh Government funding, which provides local authorities with grant funding to encourage local businesses to open their toilet facilities to the public, should be ring-fenced. The community toilet scheme must be better publicised and promoted if it is to form part of a co-ordinated sustainable solution to toilet provision.
- The Welsh Government should impose a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilets across Wales.
- In the absence of a statutory duty, local authorities should provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilet facilities in communities.
- Local authorities should work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to facilitate inclusive social opportunities for older people, including educational, social and health-related activities. Local authorities should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of council facilities.
- Local authorities must provide adequate public library services and comply with their statutory duty.
- The vital role of library services in facilitating digital inclusion must be protected and extended to ensure that such services are accessible to older people.
- Service providers must ensure that important services are accessible, irrespective of whether or not someone is online. Services provided online need to be high quality and easy to use, whilst offline services should be of equal quality and fully accessible.
- Town planners should be required to demonstrate how they have engaged the local community in the planning process, and all plans must be subject to an equality impact assessment.

The built environment in communities

This policy statement covers:

- Street design and maintenance
- Public seating
- Public toilets
- Places to meet in the community
- Public libraries
- Town planning

Note: Community services, housing and public transport are covered in other Age Cymru policy statements.

Public policy proposals

Current policy

More needs to be done to improve the built environment in order to develop age friendly communities across Wales. Evidence gathered by Age Cymru through the Towards Common Ground campaign³ and Community Calculator^{TM4} indicates that improvements to services and communities are needed in all areas of Wales. The evidence identifies that many older and disabled people face considerable barriers to independent living on a daily basis and specific problems with access to services and facilities.

Age Cymru has produced a policy document 'Creating an age friendly Wales'⁵ and is developing a programme of work and influencing around this. Becoming age friendly as a nation is, in effect, a social and cultural change programme that will need to permeate all aspects of our society. The principles need to be embedded widely, not just within government programmes, but within the curriculums in our schools and colleges through to the principles which underpin our social care and health systems. Our public and private domains need to be involved, and being age friendly should be synonymous with good business and public services.

The Welsh Government's Strategy for Older People in Wales (2013-2023)⁶ identifies a key challenge 'to develop communities that are age-friendly while ensuring older people have the resources they need to live'. The Strategy acknowledges that as the number of older people in our communities is growing, and recognising the health and wellbeing benefits of social connectedness, it is vital that communities become more age friendly and facilitate the access and participation of people of all ages. It also highlights the importance of older people being full participants in society. However, many older people come up against barriers that prevent

³ Help the Aged in Wales (2008) Towards Common Ground.

⁴ Age Cymru (2010) Towards Common Ground: Key findings of the Community CalculatorTM

⁵ Age Cymru (2015) Creating an age friendly Wales

⁶ Welsh Government (2013) The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023.

their participation, and what should be an enjoyable stage of life can become a time of loneliness and isolation.

The Strategy references the Ageing Well in Wales programme,⁷ led by the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, as a means of supporting the creation of sustainable age friendly communities. This programme aims to support agencies to make the necessary changes, plan better for the future and learn from and adapt the work of the World Health Organisation (WHO) initiatives on Healthy Cities and Age-friendly communities.⁸

As part of the process for Wales to be recognised as an age friendly nation, all 22 of Wales' local authorities have signed up to the Dublin Declaration, showing commitment at local levels to creating communities that are inclusive and supportive for all, regardless of their age. The Dublin Declaration demonstrates a city or community's pledge to become 'age-friendly' using the eight WHO domains as a framework for development. Each city or community will have to demonstrate a process of consultation with older people (and other age groups), planning, implementation and evaluation to become part of the WHO Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities.⁹ Each local authority in Wales has submitted a local plan outlining the action they will take over the next three years to deliver Ageing Well priorities.¹⁰

The importance of providing age friendly public spaces and services is underpinned by the Equality Act 2010. To achieve a more equal society, the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)¹¹ requires all public bodies to take positive steps to advance equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and foster good relations between different groups in society. The PSED is supported by Specific Duties in Wales,¹² which require listed public bodies in Wales to develop equality objectives for all protected characteristics, including age, and carry out equality impact assessments on their policies and practices. Together these provide a framework that can assist public bodies to understand the needs of the ageing population and to ensure that decisions they make do not disproportionately impact on particular groups, including older people.

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales published a report 'The importance and impact of Community Services within Wales'.¹³ The report makes a case for protecting community services, which include public toilets, pavements, public seating and libraries. The Commissioner states that these community-based services and facilities are not luxuries; they are essential to the maintenance of older people's health, independence and wellbeing. The

⁷ Older People's Commissioner for Wales. Ageing Well in Wales.

<http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/Ageingwell/The-programme.aspx>

⁸ Welsh Government, The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023.

⁹ Ageing Well in Wales. Age-Friendly Communities. <http://www.ageingwellinwales.com/en/themes/age-friendly-communities>

¹⁰ Ageing Well in Wales. Ageing Well in Wales Achievements and Forward Looking.

<http://www.ageingwellinwales.com/Libraries/Documents/AW-Ph1-Achievements-Ph2-Forward-Look.pdf>

¹¹ Equality Act 2010 http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2010/ukpga_20100015_en_1

¹² The Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011 <http://www.assemblywales.org/sub-ld8462-e.pdf>

¹³ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2014) The Importance and Impact of Community Services within Wales.

report highlights that community services should be seen as community assets, to reflect their vital importance, and are the foundations upon which the lives of communities are built.¹⁴

The Welsh Government has recently consulted on ‘Protecting Community Assets’¹⁵ acknowledging that there are challenges in the current financial climate, which have placed great pressures upon our communities, threatening many services that are valued. A summary of the consultation responses has been published, which aims to help inform a future delivery model in Wales.¹⁶

The Welsh Government’s Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015¹⁷ includes a set of national goals which aim to help to promote sustainability. Community assets play a strong part in this approach, particularly in creating more cohesive communities.¹⁸ One of the goals of the Act is ‘A Wales of cohesive communities’ described as ‘attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities’.¹⁹ We believe that community assets have an important role in promoting social inclusion and helping to enable older people to participate in the community, and it is vitally important that older people are able to continue to access them.

Key calls:

- The application of the principles of the Dublin Declaration and the implementation of Ageing Well Plans by local authorities in Wales must be robustly monitored and evaluated.
- Local authorities must conduct meaningful equality impact assessments on their budget decisions to ensure that cuts and changes to services and facilities are not having a disproportionate effect on older people.
- Decisions about changes to services and facilities must take older people’s needs into account through effective engagement and consultation.

Street design and maintenance

Features of street design and maintenance can have an impact on whether older people are able to feel safe to get about and take part in community life. Problems include a lack of physical access for people with mobility difficulties, those who need to use mobility scooters and wheelchairs, and people that are unable to navigate steps. Such problems can also be encountered when accessing buildings.

Lesser-quality environments are often considered by older people to pose an increased falls risk, especially by those with vision, mobility or other impairments. They can heighten fears about crime, nuisance and traffic and make going out less enticing, reinforcing feelings of loneliness or entrenching the challenges of socio-economic deprivation.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Welsh Government (2015) Protecting Community Assets. Consultation Document.

¹⁶ Welsh Government (2015) Consultation – summary of responses. Protecting Community Assets.

¹⁷ Welsh Government (2015) Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

¹⁸ Welsh Government (2015) Protecting Community Assets. Consultation Document.

¹⁹ Welsh Government (2015) Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Essentials.

²⁰ I’DGO Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors. Why does the outdoor environment matter? Research findings.

The Community Calculator™ identified the disabling effect that poor quality pavements can have on the daily lives and wellbeing of older people. A lack of safe pavements can place serious restrictions on freedom of movement and mobility. Key issues across Wales included poorly maintained pavements, inadequate access for wheelchairs and mobility scooters, and problems with pavement ‘clutter’, including parked cars, bins and shop wares. Pavements that are in a state of disrepair, or are obstructed, compromise the safety and independence of older people and increase the risk and fear of falling. Older people have also raised issues such as the hazard of overgrown hedges / trees and a build-up of slippery leaves on the pavement, a lack of gritting of pavements in the winter, and less frequent refuse collections which could contribute to the blocking of pavements.

Age Cymru has previously campaigned for local authorities to repair dangerous pavements to prevent falls and reduce the fear of falling among older people. A report by Help the Aged²¹ revealed that local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland were holding back funds to cover the potential cost of personal injury claims when people fell on pavements. In some cases, councils were holding back more to cover these possible expenses that they were spending on emergency pavement repairs.²²

Research by I'DGO²³ found that inconsistency between types of road crossing and tactile paving, for example, can make older people uncertain about features that are designed to be enabling.

Many respondents to the Community Calculator™ commented upon their inability to go out after dark; switching off street lighting by local authorities can lead to an increased fear of going out. Inadequate lighting can impose an unacceptable restriction on many older people due to fear of their physical and social environments. In winter months particularly, poor street lighting can have an enormous impact upon many older people's ability to access community services and opportunities to socialise. Furthermore, the installation of new lighting technology for street lamps can cause dark areas between localised pools of light.

Switching off CCTV cameras by local authorities (as a result of budget cutbacks) may also lead to an increased fear of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Local authorities have a key role in making sure that streets are safe and accessible by providing good lighting and the appropriate use of CCTV cameras. Pavements must be safe and well maintained and be free of obstruction. Tactile paving must be used appropriately. Pedestrian crossings must be sufficient in number and give people sufficient time to cross roads. Signage should be simple, easily visible and understandable, and appropriate language provision should be considered.

Key calls:

²¹ Help the Aged (2008) Falling Short: the state of our pavement. An investigation for the National Falls Awareness Day Campaign.

²² MNT (2008) Help the Aged Reveals Councils Are Holding Back £millions For Pavement Falls Payouts, UK. 24 June 2008. <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/112524.php>

²³ I'DGO Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors. Why does the outdoor environment matter? Research findings.

- Local authorities must ensure that streets are safe and accessible, with good lighting. Pedestrian crossings must allow sufficient time to cross roads, signage should be easily visible, and pavements must be well maintained and be free of obstruction.
- Local authorities must review public places and spaces and provide reasonable adjustments as required by the Equality Act 2010.

Public seating

Without adequate seating and places to rest, accessing community areas and facilities can present a substantial challenge for older people. For some older people, public seating can be the difference between living a full life and feeling cut-off and isolated. Going shopping, queuing at the post office, waiting at the bus stop or taking a walk in the park can become impossible if there is nowhere to sit down. Public seating is an essential feature for any area that seeks to be age friendly, but there is a lack of good quality public seating in many places.

Age Cymru's Community Calculator™ found a general lack of seating in communities in Wales, including at bus stops and in community areas, town centres and parks. Research in England reports how older people are deterred from visiting towns and cities because of a lack of places to sit (and a lack of public toilets).²⁴ In a survey of 200 older people in the UK by I'DGO,²⁵ findings showed that a lack of purpose-built seating placed at regular intervals in neighbourhood streets limits older pedestrians who, primarily for health reasons, need to stop frequently to rest when walking between their home and local amenities. Most people adopted an 'anything is welcome' attitude, appropriating low walls, bus shelter seating and even concrete litter bins to perch on. Others were very clear that feeling both supported and safe were their priorities, so they did not want to sit back-to-back with anyone, or could, for reasons of mobility, only use seats with back and arm rests.

Key call:

- Local authorities must ensure that older people's needs are taken into account in providing adequate and appropriate seating in communities.

Public toilets

Public toilets are essential to making communities age friendly and a lack of them can have a debilitating effect on older people, preventing people from accessing key services and increasing loneliness and isolation. Adequate public toilet provision is vital to enable older people to maintain their dignity and participate in community life.

²⁴ The Telegraph (2014) Town and city centres 'becoming elderly no-go zones' 27/04/2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/elderhealth/10790429/Town-and-city-centres-becoming-elderly-no-go-zones.html>

²⁵ I'DGO Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors. Design Guide 001. Seating.

Poor toilet provision and access disproportionately affects some groups including older people and disabled people.²⁶ As people grow older they are more likely to develop continence issues; in the UK, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 7 men over 65 experience incontinence.²⁷ Poor public toilet provision impacts upon many older people as it reduces their ability to remain active and restricts how often, and for how long, they are able to leave their homes.

Despite the importance of these facilities, public toilets are disappearing from our communities at an alarming rate and we believe that assertive action is needed to halt this decline. The British Toilet Association estimates that the UK's public toilets have declined by 40% in the past decade,²⁸ and many are at risk of permanent closure. The Welsh Senate of Older People's 'P is for People' campaign has also raised awareness of the lack of public toilet provision in Wales.²⁹

Public toilets are typically provided and maintained by local authorities. The Public Health Act 1936 gives local authorities the power to provide public toilets, however it is a discretionary service which local authorities have no duty to provide.

Other means to complement public toilet facilities include toilets available for public use in both the public sector (e.g. public libraries, sports centres, museums etc) and the private sector. The Welsh Government funded Community Toilet Grant Scheme (launched in 2008) provided local authorities with grant funding to encourage local businesses to open their facilities to the public. This scheme was extended annually from April 2012 before the funding was transferred into the Revenue Support Grant from 2014/15, where it is no longer ring-fenced. It is now for each local authority to decide how funding is utilised to deliver the range of services it is responsible for in order to meet the needs and priorities of its communities.^{30,31}

Research by the Welsh Senate of Older People³² reported a distinct variation in the involvement, promotion and uptake of the Scheme across Wales. We believe that the Scheme, together with the provision of toilet facilities for public use within public buildings, must be better publicised and promoted. There must be clear and visible branding and signage (eg notices in windows of premises taking part in the Scheme), if they are to form part of a co-ordinated sustainable solution to toilet provision alongside public toilets provided by the local authority. It is important that toilets in the Scheme are accessible.

²⁶ Welsh Government (2014) Welsh Government White Paper. Listening to you: Your health matters. Consultation on proposal for a Public Health Bill. Number WG20703 <http://wales.gov.uk/consultations/healthsocialcare/white-paper/?lang=en>

²⁷ Martin *et al.*, (2006) Systematic Review and Evaluation of Methods of Assessing Urinary Incontinence, Health Technology Assessment.

²⁸ British Toilet Association, Archived News from the British Toilet Association.

²⁹ Welsh Senate of Older People (2012). P is for People. Public toilet provision research.

³⁰ British Toilet Association (2015) Public Health Wales Bill. June 12, 2015. <http://www.britloos.co.uk/?p=1427> (Accessed 21/04/16).

³¹ Welsh Government (2014) Welsh Government White Paper. Listening to you: Your health matters. Consultation on proposal for a Public Health Bill. Number WG20703

³² Welsh Senate of Older People (2014) P is for People. Campaigning for better public toilets in Wales. Report on findings of Campaign Working Group of the Welsh Senate of Older People. Spring 2014.

The Public Health (Wales) Bill³³ included proposals to strengthen the role of public authorities in planning for the provision of and access to toilets for public use to meet the needs of their communities. The Bill included a proposal to establish a duty for each local authority to develop a strategy for the provision of and access to toilets for public use in their area. The Bill was rejected by the National Assembly for Wales,³⁴ hence the public toilet provisions within the Bill will not now become law. We urge the Welsh Government to revisit this issue and take it further by introducing a statutory duty on local government in Wales to provide adequate toilet facilities across Wales. We are very concerned that Wales' public toilets network is at real risk unless action is taken to protect them.

Key calls:

- Welsh Government funding, which provides local authorities with grant funding to encourage local businesses to open their toilet facilities to the public, should be ring-fenced. The community toilet scheme must be better publicised and promoted if it is to form part of a co-ordinated sustainable solution to toilet provision.
- The Welsh Government should impose a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilets across Wales
- In the absence of a statutory duty, local authorities should provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilet facilities in communities.

Places to meet in the community

The Community CalculatorTM reported an overall lack of places to meet in communities across Wales with many references to the closure of community facilities. We believe that all neighbourhoods should include places for older people to participate in community life and community activities, such as a library (see below), a community centre, or a public park, to help prevent isolation, loneliness and health decline. Day centres and lunch clubs are lifelines for many older people.

Older people have said that local authorities could do more to support and facilitate informal interest groups and clubs, and have suggested that public buildings such as schools could be used at weekends and evenings.

We believe that local authorities have a vital role in supporting community facilities and activities through working in partnership with voluntary and community groups, and exploring the co-design and delivery of such services. Such facilities could also promote intergenerational activities.

A common barrier concerning some community facilities such as leisure centres and libraries is that the cost to hire the facilities or a single room is not affordable. Costs may be too high for some community groups or organisations to make services, projects or activities sustainable. If hire costs are too high, facilities are not used and remain empty. It can be the case that community halls etc have received grants to upgrade the facility (often using the community benefits to obtain the grants) but are then underused because of affordability

³³ Public Health (Wales) Bill <http://senedd.assembly.wales/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?lId=12763>

³⁴ Ibid.

issues. There is also a perceived lack of promotion within some communities of the availability or what is provided within community facilities, which can also prevent participation.³⁵

The Ageing Well work that Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn undertakes has been highly acclaimed on a national level, and has utilised many community buildings such as community centres, town halls, memorial halls, sports facilities, church / chapel halls, public libraries and leisure centres to develop the provision.³⁶ The Age Well Centre model is inclusive and is based around social engagement, with a choice of activities based on members' preferences and interests. It is an ideal vehicle for improving health and well-being, and draws people in to a community which offers support to maintain positive changes.

Key call:

- Local authorities should work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to facilitate inclusive social opportunities for older people, including educational, social and health-related activities. Local authorities should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of council facilities.

Public libraries

Public libraries are greatly valued by many older people and help enable people to engage in social, cultural and educational facilities. Libraries also have the potential to act as community hubs, as a place where people can access information.

Enabling social interaction and the ability to take part in activities such as lifelong learning is central to promoting positive mental health and can help to reduce the need for intensive health and social care support. Research from NIACE³⁷ provides evidence of the importance of learning for older people, reporting that there are real benefits not only in terms of personal enjoyment, but also for physical and mental health, social engagement and ability to manage their lives.

Under the Public Libraries and Museum Act 1964, libraries are a statutory service that local authorities in Wales are obliged to provide.³⁸ However, despite the commitments made in the Welsh Government's Programme for Government from 2011 to 2016³⁹ and the 'Libraries Inspire' framework⁴⁰, many library services are under threat of closure across Wales. The National Assembly for Wales Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's

³⁵ Age Cymru (2015) Age Cymru response to Welsh Government consultation on 'Protecting Community Assets' which includes 'Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn report on 'Protecting Community Assets' September 2015'.

³⁶ Age Cymru (2015) Age Cymru response to Welsh Government consultation on 'Protecting Community Assets' which includes 'Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn report on 'Protecting Community Assets' September 2015'.

³⁷ Age Cymru (2013) EnvisAGE. No.13. Article by Stephen McNair 'How important is learning for older people?'

³⁸ Memorandum from the Welsh Assembly Government. Constitutional Law: Devolution, Wales. Proposal for a Legislative Competence Order on Culture and other fields. June 2009.

³⁹ Welsh Government (2013) Programme for Government. Annual Report 2013.

⁴⁰ Welsh Government (2011) Libraries Inspire. The strategic development framework for Welsh libraries 2012-16.

report into public libraries in Wales⁴¹ has recommended ‘that the Minister works with partners to develop a contemporary definition of “comprehensive and efficient” library services for local authorities to deliver under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Such a definition should include the provision of internet access which, we believe, should remain free of charge.’

Libraries are vitally important as places where older people can access computer technology and learn new skills, so they have an important role in promoting digital inclusion. The Welsh Government’s Digital Inclusion Framework has identified older people as one of the priority groups for digital inclusion, and has set targets to reduce levels of digital exclusion among older people. The Delivery Plan for the Framework references the role of public libraries in providing free community access and assistance to those that do not have the internet at home.⁴² As public library services are under pressure in many areas,⁴³ we believe that the vital role of library services in facilitating digital inclusion must be protected and extended to ensure that such services are accessible to older people.

We believe that cuts in library services will lead to an increase in isolation and loneliness for older people, and affect their ability to participate fully in society. A reduction in library services would impact on older people’s ability to engage in social, cultural and educational activities, and may inhibit the learning of new skills such as digital technology. With a number of information services increasingly reliant on online provision, it is important that older people have the opportunity to access and use digital services to help prevent discrimination and exclusion.

Key calls:

- Local authorities must provide adequate public library services and comply with their statutory duty.
- The vital role of library services in facilitating digital inclusion must be protected and extended to ensure that such services are accessible to older people.

Town planning

The town and country planning system in Wales regulates the use and development of all land and buildings. It currently operates at two levels: nationally, through the Welsh Government and the Planning Inspectorate; and locally, through 25 Local Planning Authorities (22 Unitary Authorities and three National Park Authorities).⁴⁴ A third ‘regional’ tier could be introduced by the Planning (Wales) Act 2015, which received Royal Assent in July 2015.⁴⁵

⁴¹ National Assembly for Wales Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee (2014) Public Libraries in Wales.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ National Assembly for Wales (2011) The Planning Series. 1 National planning policy in Wales.

⁴⁵ NAW (2016) Comparison of the planning systems in the four UK countries.

A Local Planning Authority has the legal authority to carry out local planning functions, including the development of land use policies and the granting of planning permission. Local planning policies are set out in the Local Development Plan.⁴⁶

Feedback we have received is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for older people to be involved in town planning, as consultations are often only available online which excludes a high number of older people. It was felt that local planning departments should make services available to ensure that details of new planning applications are accessible in other ways. It was deemed that there is a need for dialogue with planners about the interests of older people in planning issues, and that town planners should be required to demonstrate how they have engaged with the local community in the planning process. In some cases 50+ forums are consulted about such issues, but this is not always the case. Communication between various local authority departments was felt to be important, and that all plans should be subject to an equality impact assessment.

- Service providers must ensure that important services are accessible, irrespective of whether or not someone is online. Services provided online need to be high quality and easy to use, whilst offline services should be of equal quality and fully accessible.
- Town planners should be required to demonstrate how they have engaged the local community in the planning process, and all plans should be subject to an equality impact assessment.

⁴⁶ National Assembly for Wales (2013) The Planning Series. 2. Local planning policy in Wales.