

Public Policy Statement Loneliness

May 2017

Note: This policy statement focuses on those community services and activities which facilitate the inclusion and participation of older people, which can help overcome loneliness and isolation. Age Cymru has separate public policy statements on the built environment (which includes the provision of public toilets), community services and inclusion' and public transport.

Summary

Loneliness and isolation are a daily reality for many older people. 75,000 older people in Wales reported 'always or often' feeling lonely¹, and there is increasing evidence that this can have severe implications for physical and mental health.

People may become increasingly isolated in later life for diverse reasons, including retirement, bereavement, ill health, a lack of local services or transport and a poor physical environment. Some older people choose to miss out on socialising or activities because even small charges for these, or the costs of transport, are beyond them. This means that some people barely leave their home, resulting in chronic loneliness and what we increasingly understand to be the severe health impacts associated with this.

Local services and amenities

A vital aspect of creating an Age Friendly Wales is to enable older people to play an active role in society and to remove some of the barriers that can lead to isolation and increase opportunities for older people. However, the current financial climate has resulted in the loss, or threatened loss, of many services including public libraries, leisure facilities, day/community centres and adult learning classes.

Access to meeting places and social activities is important for older people. We believe a flexible approach is required to provide such facilities by building partnerships between public, private and voluntary sectors and innovative multi-uses of existing council facilities.

The Post Office network also has an important social and economic value and often forms a focal point for older people, particularly in rural and deprived urban communities. Maintaining a Post Office network (branches or mobile services) means that older people are able to continue to access a range of important services, as well as keep in touch with others.

¹ Age Cymru (2017), No one should have no one: tackling loneliness and isolation in Wales.

Politicians at all levels must pay close attention to the impact proposed cuts will have on older people. Local authorities must conduct full and meaningful equality impact assessments to ensure that cuts and changes to services and facilities are not having a disproportionate effect on older people. Furthermore, older people should be fully involved in identifying and developing solutions to isolation.

Volunteering and lifelong learning

Volunteering can be a valuable means to combat isolation, and plays an active part in delivering services such as befriending schemes, whilst learning opportunities enable individuals to develop new social networks and gain new skills and knowledge. However, funding for adult community learning has faced substantial budget cuts.

We believe that opportunities to learn both for work and pleasure should be available to people of all ages, and the value of non-vocational learning for older people must be recognised.

The Built environment

Features of street design and maintenance can have an impact on whether older people are able to safely get about and take part in community life. For some older people, public seating and toilet provision can be the difference between living a full life and feeling cut-off and isolated. It is therefore vital that the built environment enables, rather than prevents, older people to take an active part in their communities. We should aim to minimise factors such as poorly maintained pavements, cars parking on pavements, street 'clutter', inadequate street lighting and a lack of seating in public spaces.

Public transport

Public and community transport are vitally important in helping older people to access services², maintain independence and contact with friends and family. The free bus travel scheme has been invaluable, but it is vital this continues to be supported by the Welsh Government. However, particularly for older people with limited mobility, the introduction of additional bus stops and shelters with seating would make public transport more accessible.

Local bus services remain vulnerable to spending cuts or commercial decisions. The Welsh Government must work with local authorities to support a sustainable network, and contingency plans must be developed in the case of threats to existing services.

Community transport schemes should also be developed, especially in rural areas, with successful models being replicated more widely.

Policy proposals

- The Welsh Government and local authorities should involve older people in identifying and developing solutions to isolation.

² Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2014) The Importance and Impact of Community Services within Wales.

- Welsh Government should launch a national campaign to raise awareness of the causes of loneliness and encourage people to make connections with their local community.
- Welsh Government and local authorities should support people to cope well with life stages which can increase loneliness.
- Welsh Government should work with local authorities to monitor and respond to the impact of the withdrawal of local services on older people, including facilities such as community facilities, public transport routes and the built environment.
- Welsh Government and local authorities should invest in community development that enables older people to be involved in developing and delivering solutions to isolation.
- Partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors should be explored to increase the availability of facilities for groups and activities in communities. Local authorities, community and town councils should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of council facilities.
- Local authorities must work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to ensure that social, learning, creative and volunteering opportunities are available within reach of older people to enable them to participate and contribute, to help reduce isolation and loneliness.
- A range of volunteering options should be developed to meet the diverse needs of older people, including those who are making the transition from work into retirement, or those who are seeking to improve their skills.
- Local authorities must ensure that older people's needs are taken into account in providing communities with good lighting and adequate and appropriate seating.
- The Welsh Government should impose a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilets.
- 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 Welsh Government must work with local authorities and community and public transport providers to support a sustainable integrated transport network across Wales to ensure that older people remain connected to communities and services.

Loneliness and isolation

Loneliness and isolation are a daily reality for many older people. 75,000 older people in Wales reported 'always or often' feeling lonely³. Being socially isolated has many detrimental effects on older people, including a lack of the stimulation that social contact brings, and an inability to contribute to society or fulfil their own potential. There is increasing evidence that this can have severe implications for physical and mental health.

³ Age Cymru (2017), No one should have no one: tackling loneliness and isolation in Wales.

People may become increasingly isolated in later life for diverse reasons, including bereavement, ill health, a lack of local services or transport and a poor physical environment.

Some older people choose to miss out on socialising or activities because even small charges for these, or the costs of transport, are beyond them. This means that some people barely leave their home, resulting in chronic loneliness and what we increasingly understand to be the severe health impacts associated with this.

Policy proposals

- Welsh Government should launch a national campaign to raise awareness of the causes of loneliness and encourage people to make connections with their local community.
- Welsh Government and local authorities should support people to cope well with life stages which can increase loneliness.

Local services and amenities

A vital aspect of creating an Age Friendly Wales is to enable older people to play an active role in society and to remove some of the barriers that can lead to isolation, such as a lack of local services and facilities, poor transport, and digital exclusion – and increase opportunities for older people to pursue an interest, join in and have a role in their communities. It is important that older people have opportunities to participate in their local community through social activities, learning and volunteering.

Community services have a role in addressing loneliness by promoting social inclusion and community cohesion, helping older people to participate in their community. However, the current financial climate has placed great pressures upon communities, threatening many services. Local authorities, the key providers of community services, have experienced significant budget reductions over past years, with cuts in many areas including public libraries, leisure facilities, day/community centres and adult learning classes.

To help tackle loneliness, we believe that accessing meeting places and social activities is important for older people. In the current economic climate, a flexible approach is required to provide such facilities. Partnerships between public, private and voluntary sectors should be explored to increase the availability of facilities for groups and activities in communities. Local authorities, town and community councils should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of existing council facilities in multiple ways. Furthermore, the current trend to close down community facilities for financial reasons will need to be countered.

Community and day centres are important as places where older people can socialise, carry out activities, take up learning opportunities and volunteer. They play a vital role in combating loneliness amongst older people. The loss of these centres would have far-reaching implications for older people. As such, providers of community services must embrace the principles of user engagement and consult older people about the changes or design of services which may affect them.

Similarly, libraries provide an important social, cultural and educational resource, where people can meet and take part in community activities, as well as utilising digital technology, helping older people combat social isolation⁴, loneliness and health decline. A reduction in library services would impact on older people's ability to engage in these activities, and may inhibit the learning of new skills. As such, we believe that local authorities must comply with their statutory duty to provide adequate public library services. In particular, the vital role of library services in facilitating digital inclusion should be given high consideration.

The Post Office network also has an important social and economic value and often forms a focal point for older people, particularly in rural and deprived urban communities. Maintaining a sustainable and accessible Post Office network (branches or mobile services) means that older people are able to continue to access a range of important services, as well as keep in touch with other members of their communities.

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 and consequently lead to increased levels of loneliness.

Policy proposals

- Welsh Government should work with local authorities to monitor and respond to the impact of the withdrawal of local services on older people, including facilities such as community facilities, public transport routes and the built environment.
- Welsh Government and local authorities should invest in community development that enables older people to be involved in developing and delivering solutions to isolation.
- Partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors should be explored to increase the availability of facilities for groups and activities in communities. Local authorities, community and town councils should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of council facilities.

Volunteering and lifelong learning

Volunteering can be a valuable means to combat isolation, as well as enabling people to make a transition from work into retirement or those seeking to improve their skills. Volunteering also plays an active part in delivering services such as befriending schemes, which are important in reducing loneliness amongst older people. Volunteering options should therefore be developed to meet the diverse needs of older people.

⁴Age UK (2013) Digital inclusion evidence review.

Similarly, the benefits of lifelong learning include developing new social networks, helping to combat loneliness, and gaining new skills and knowledge. However, funding for adult community learning has faced substantial budget cuts. We believe that opportunities to learn both for work and pleasure should be available to people of all ages, and the value of non-vocational learning for older people must be recognised.

- Local authorities must work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to ensure that social, learning, creative and volunteering opportunities are available within reach of older people to enable them to participate and contribute, to help reduce isolation and loneliness.
- A range of volunteering options should be developed to meet the diverse needs of older people, including those who are making the transition from work into retirement, or those who are seeking to improve their skills.

The Built environment

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, and thus affects their potential to experience loneliness. 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.

For some older people, public seating can be the difference between living a full life and feeling cut-off and isolated, whilst public toilets are essential to making communities age friendly: a lack of them can have a debilitating effect on older people, preventing them from accessing key services and increasing loneliness and isolation.

It is therefore vital that the built environment enables, rather than prevents, older people to take an active part in their communities. We should therefore aim to minimise factors such as poorly maintained pavements, car parking on pavements, street 'clutter', inadequate street lighting, and a lack of seating in public spaces. Importantly, the lack of public toilets needs to be addressed – adequate public toilet provision is vital to enable older people to maintain their dignity and participate in community life.

Policy proposals

- Local authorities must ensure that older people's needs are taken into account in providing communities with good lighting and adequate and appropriate seating.
- The Welsh Government should impose a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide adequate numbers of accessible public toilets across Wales.

- 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.

Public transport

Public and community transport are also vitally important in helping older people to maintain independence and contact with friends and family, helping to avoid loneliness and isolation. Without appropriate services and infrastructure older people can become isolated from their community and society, unable to access essential services⁵.

The free bus travel scheme has been invaluable in helping older people in Wales to retain their independence and remain active, and it is vital that this continues to be supported by the Welsh Government. However, for older people with limited mobility, simply getting to the bus stop and on and off the bus are significant issues which are compounded by a lack of facilities. We believe more bus stops and shelters with seating would make public transport more accessible.

We are extremely concerned that local bus services remain vulnerable to spending cuts or commercial decisions. The Welsh Government must work with local authorities to support a sustainable network of bus services across Wales, and contingency plans must be developed in the case of threats to existing services.

Furthermore, whilst community transport schemes provide an essential lifeline for many older people, especially in rural areas, we wish to see increased provision across the whole of Wales, with successful models being replicated more widely.

Age Cymru's vision of an age friendly Wales would see the development of a fully integrated sustainable transport network, with trains and buses linked to other forms of transport including pedestrian and cycle routes, and better integration between transport and key services.

Older people's needs should be taken into account through effective engagement and consultation when determining changes and funding priorities for community services and amenities. Further, local authorities need to work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to ensure that social, learning and creative opportunities are available within reach of older people.

Policy proposal

- The Welsh Government must work with local authorities and community and public transport providers to support a sustainable integrated transport network across Wales to ensure that older people remain connected to communities and services.

⁵ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2014) The Importance and Impact of Community Services within Wales.