



Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru

**Response from the Older
People's Commissioner for Wales
to the
Welsh Government draft budget
proposals for 2013-14**

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The role of the Older People's Commissioner

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales, Sarah Rochira, is an independent champion for older people across Wales. The Commissioner and her team work to ensure that older people have a voice that is heard, that they have choice and control, that they don't feel isolated or discriminated against and that Wales is a good place to grow older.

The Commissioner and her team:

- Promote awareness of the rights and interests of older people in Wales
- Challenge age discrimination against older people in Wales
- Encourage best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales
- Review the law affecting the interests of older people in Wales

Our work is driven by what older people say matter to them. Older people's voices are at the heart of our work and an on-going programme of engagement with older people ensures that we fully understand the challenges and issues for those aged 60 or over in Wales.

Introduction

The Commissioner recognises the challenge faced by Welsh Government in allocating the limited resources available in its budget for 2013-14. The Commissioner will be looking for assurances that older people in Wales will not suffer disproportionately as a consequence of decisions and actions taken by Welsh Government to meet budgetary pressures.

Where the indicative budget allocations lead to the need for a change in the nature of service provision or a change in accessibility of services then there are three key areas in which the Commissioner will be looking for evidence:

- active engagement with older people in the development of service proposals in advance and throughout formal consultation processes.
- information in accessible formats and, where needed, access to independent advocacy services to explain and advise on the impact of any proposed changes to services.
- robust assessment of the impact on older people of any proposed changes to services as required by public bodies under the Equality Act 2010.

When made available, the Commissioner will consider the adequacy of Welsh Government's own impact assessment of its indicative budget and publish our findings at a future date. Above all, she will want to ensure that older people are treated fairly, and not disproportionately impacted by public service cuts.

Older people in Wales already experience high levels of poverty and deprivation. Figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show that there are 110,000 older people in Wales living in poverty, and research by Consumer Focus Wales reveals that over half the older people in Wales rely on the state pension and benefits as their main or only source of income. We hear from older people who are scared that their personal circumstances will only get worse due to the unprecedented constraints on public finances, coupled with the broader impact of the current economic situation on any savings or private income they may have prudently put away for their old age.

Older people should never be considered a burden on Welsh Government or on other public bodies who provide services to meet their needs. It remains necessary for the Commissioner to champion the economic contribution made by older people in Wales:

- £496M – value of unpaid voluntary work carried out by older people in Wales.
- £259M - value of child care provided by grandparents in Wales.
- £5.69M - the approximate value of unpaid care in Wales¹.

Their contribution sustains the broader economy and limits the pressure on other public services in Wales. The majority of older people ask only for a little bit of help, when they need it, to sustain their wellbeing and independence.

Our response

Response to question 1

Question 1: Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2013-14, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective?

As in previous years, the expectation of the Commissioner is to see evidence of a clear and consistent approach adopted at a national, regional and local levels.

The Auditor General for Wales' report in 2011 – A Picture of Public Services - highlighted that 'transformation through innovation, sharing and acting on good practice and improving efficiency is the sustainable solution in the long term'. The Commissioner supports this view.

We need to act more smartly, and move much faster and further than we have contemplated before. We need to make planning and delivery of services across organisational boundaries a reality and not rhetoric. Only by adopting this approach will we bring about the changes needed

¹ WRVS 'Gold Age Pensioners' report 2011

that have the potential to deliver better services for older people in Wales.

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- robust assessment of impact on older people of any proposed changes to services as required by public bodies under the Equality Act 2010.

Equality Impact Assessment

The Welsh Government is required to update its own extant Equality Impact Assessment relating to the 2012-13 indicative budget and assess 'Age' as a protected characteristic. The Commissioner will then consider the adequacy of Welsh Government's own assessment and publish our findings.

Home Adaptations

The Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) referred to cuts to Care and Repair's Rapid Response Home Adaptations scheme, noting that 'There is a potential for fewer older people to benefit from the programme resulting in prospects of more prolonged stays in hospital and residential care'.

The document noted that potentially fewer people will be able to remain in their homes for as long as possible. The cost of these adaptations is

relatively small in comparison to the benefits for older people and public services.

This decision to cut funding runs counter to the recognition in both the Welsh Government's own Strategy for Older People, and the Equality of Opportunity Committee's Report on Home Maintenance and Adaptation Services for Older People of the importance of these adaptations. Therefore we would expect to see evidence in the next phase of the Equality Impact Assessment of any change in the number of older people have receiving support, and evidence from Welsh Government as to what steps they have taken to mitigate or prevent a reduction in numbers.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Also of concern is the issue of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The Commissioner has commented recently on the unacceptably long time taken by some local authorities to process these grants. DFGs should be approved or refused within 6 months of being applied for and should be paid within 12 months of applying. Seven local authorities in Wales failed to meet their legal target for paying these grants to those who need them.

With some authorities taking up to two years on average to process these payments there is a clear detrimental impact on people's ability to remain independent, a majority of whom will be older people. This leaves local authorities open to potential judicial review, and the Commissioner will be watching developments with interest.

Poverty and Fuel Poverty

At the time it was written, the EIA 2012-13 made reference to the need for the Fuel Poverty strategy to adequately address the needs of older people, as well as other protected groups. Older people represent a large proportion of those who need help with fuel bills, and are

particularly at risk of suffering a decline in their health if they are unable to adequately heat their home.

The Fuel Poverty strategy now forms part of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan. The Commissioner has already written to the Minister for Local Government saying that we would have welcomed clearer recognition in the Action Plan that tackling pensioner poverty is a priority for the Welsh Government. A greater focus on action is needed, as well as clear metrics from which to establish a baseline, measure progress and target action.

Now that the Fuel Poverty strategy is no longer a discrete piece of work, and sits within an Action Plan about which we have reservations, the Commission will be closely monitoring how the Welsh Government will meet its aims as outlined in the 2012-13 EIA.

Transport

Good public transport is absolutely vital for many older people, not only as a means for those without their own transport to access essential services, but also to a means to maintain independence through getting 'out and about' on a regular basis and socialising with friends and family. Research indicates that this is vital for older people's health and wellbeing and reduces loneliness and isolation.

A large number of older people contacted the Commission last year to raise concerns about the Welsh Government's announcement that it was to cut funding for Community Transport projects across Wales. This would have left many older people, particularly those living in rural and remote areas of Wales, without any means of transportation.

Information gathered from the large number of letters and telephone calls we received over a period of several months was used as evidence to present to key decision-makers. The Commissioner met with the Welsh Government Minister with responsibilities for transport and presented accounts from older people about the impact of being left without any means of transportation and, effectively, unable to leave their homes.

The Welsh Government considered this evidence, together with information provided by other groups and, shortly afterwards, informed us that its decision to cut community transport funding had been reversed while a thorough evaluation of each of the services under threat was undertaken.

Community Services

Budgetary constraints are having an inevitable impact on a range of public services across Wales. However, this alone must not be used to justify cuts to older people's services.

The Commission was contacted regularly last year about the effect of such cuts on local services, in particular in relation to the potential closures of day centres across Wales.

Many older people and their representatives raised concerns about the actions of their local authority, with many telling us that they felt that they had been left out of the decision-making process. It is vital that older people are involved in decisions that impact on the services they receive, and often rely on, and that this is done in an appropriate and timely manner.

The Commissioner contacted local authorities across Wales, stressing the importance of older people's voices being heard, and the need for older people to be an integral part of consultation processes. Continued pressure from the Commission and older people themselves will include scrutiny of local government spending plans, engagement and consultation processes and development of new community plans.

Response to question 2

Question 2: Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2013-14, do you have any concerns about any specific areas?

The format of the indicative budget does not easily identify those areas likely to have an impact on older people to answer this question. We set out below in response to Question 4 our findings relating to the Programme for Government (PfG).

The indicative budget for the Older People's Commissioner for Wales is to be reduced from £1.732million to £1.715million. We will set out the implications of this directly with the Minister for Health and Social Services in October 2012 as part of the required Estimate submission.

Response to question 3

Question 3: What expectations do you have of the 2013-14 budget proposals? What spending commitments and priorities would you like to see reflected in the 2013-14 draft budget proposals?

The Commissioner will be looking for assurances that older people in Wales will not suffering disproportionately as a consequence of decisions and actions taken by Welsh Government to meet budgetary pressures.

When made available, the Commissioner will consider the adequacy of Welsh Government's own impact assessment of its indicative budget and publish our findings at a future date.

Response to question 4

Question 4: The new Welsh Government has published its Programme for Government. We will be using this document to guide our scrutiny of the 2013-14 draft budget. What changes would you propose to ensure that the budget delivers the objectives set out in the Programme for Government?

In general terms we welcomed the shift in focus within the PfG to the impact the decisions and actions of the Welsh Government have on people's lives.

However, we were disappointed that older people as a group were largely absent from most areas of the PfG. When older people are referred to directly it is largely in the context of healthcare and social services. The more recent Progress Report largely fails to take on board our earlier comments regarding recognition of the positive contribution that older people make to so many areas of life in Wales, such as business, education, the community, or the arts.

Conclusion

This response highlights those areas of specific concern to the Older People's Commissioner for Wales. However the core message to the Welsh Government and the bodies funded by it is that older people's services must not be seen as a soft target for cuts.

It is clear that in the face of reductions in public budgets across the board difficult decisions will have to be made. The only fair way to decide where to prioritise spending is to ensure that older people have a voice in the decision making process, and that their needs are taken into consideration. More focus is required to consider the longer term savings to be made by keeping older people independent and able to support themselves. In the short term, the withdrawal of services – such as day centres, home adaptations, and community transport - may seem like a lower priority, but their loss can be devastating to individuals who rely on them. This can then lead to further avoidable costs to the public purse further down the line.

Where public bodies fall short of their duty to ensure fairness for older people, the Commission will be ready to intervene on their behalf, ensure their voices are heard, and that they retain choice and control over their lives.