

Social care and health services in Wales

“We are all feeling that if we do get ill, as older people, whether we will get the treatment that we deserve, or if we would be seen as ‘dying soon’, and if that would result in poorer treatment.”

Older person at engagement event

The Covid-19 Pandemic has created significant challenges for our social care and health services, and those who work within them.

Whilst we have seen countless examples of inspiring dedication and commitment from staff and volunteers, the pandemic has also highlighted problems with the current social care and health system in Wales. It has demonstrated the need for urgent change, in particular the need for social care to be given parity with the National Health Service and to invest significantly more in services and support to enable healthy ageing.

It is vital that action is taken immediately and in the longer term to tackle these issues and ensure that older people can access the health and social care support that they need. Older people’s voices, must be heard and at the heart of decision-making as we move forward. We must ensure that a truly person-centred approach is taken to support older people, protect their rights and avoid scandalous actions, such as the blanket distribution of Do Not Attempt CPR notices by some GP surgeries, which made people feel that their lives were not valued. We must also ensure that the tragedy that unfolded in care homes, never happens again.

Immediate actions

Publish and implement an action plan for care homes ahead of the winter

Tragically, 694 of the 2503 deaths from Covid-19 in Wales occurred in care homes¹. Many of these deaths could have been prevented had there been a better understanding of the risks faced by care home residents and the action required to ensure they had the protection and support they needed.

An action plan for care homes is therefore critical in this regard and the Welsh Government's announcement of the development of a plan is welcome. It needs to ensure that lessons have been learnt from what has happened and that the right action is taken, at the right time, to ensure that older people living in care homes are safe, can access the wider health services and support they may need and are able to exercise their rights, all crucial to ensure they have the best possible quality of life. The experiences, views and voices of care home residents must be part of this, as set out in the Commissioner's recently published [Care Home Voices report](#).

Repeal sections of the Coronavirus Act that risk limiting older people's rights

The Coronavirus Act, passed in March as an immediate reaction to the pandemic, gave local authorities the power to limit people's rights to have their needs assessed and access the social care support they require. Whilst no local authority has formally enacted these measures to date, the Act put older people's right to care and support at risk. At the same time the ability of older people to choose a care home to move to from hospital was removed. This ability to choose must also be reinstated.

At times of crisis, upholding people's rights is particularly important. The Act should therefore be reviewed and these measures repealed at the earliest opportunity to ensure that older people's rights are upheld should there be any future outbreaks.

Reinstate the social care support that has been suspended during the lockdown

Fears and concerns about Covid-19 entering the homes of those receiving domiciliary care meant that some older people and their families felt they had to stop their support packages and have been increasingly reliant on family and friends to provide some of this support, with the number of unpaid carers in Wales increasing by 196,000 during the pandemic². For some older unpaid carers, and those caring for people living with dementia the combination of the closure of respite facilities such as day centres, combined with lockdown restrictions, has pushed them towards breaking point.

Given the vital role that domiciliary care and respite plays in supporting older people's health, well-being and independence, and the impact on the health and well-being of unpaid carers of providing additional care, social care support and respite should be reinstated as a matter of urgency by local authorities. In cases where people's needs may have changed, new assessments must be undertaken for new packages of care, including assessment and support for carers.

Preparing for the winter

All ‘non-urgent’ surgery and outpatient appointments were suspended in March and many older people, afraid of the risk of contracting Covid-19, have stayed away from GP surgeries and hospitals. This means that many older people throughout Wales will not have been able to access the healthcare services and support they need.

Immediate action is required to support those who have missed out on this support and to build older people’s confidence to access health services again, which is especially important as we approach the winter. It is positive that the eligibility criteria for the flu vaccine has been extended to everyone over 50, and this needs to be supported with a campaign to maximise take up, to protect individuals and reduce pressures on services.

Alongside this, the Welsh Government should provide additional financial support to local government and the NHS to facilitate effective early planning and preparation, and they should work closely with and support the third sector to ensure an integrated response to future outbreaks and winter pressures.

Establish a rehabilitation programme for older people

The restrictions put in place as a result of the pandemic have meant that many older people, particularly those who have been shielding or self-isolating, have been unable to participate in activities that support their health and well-being or fully engage with their communities. Older people have told the Commissioner about the impact of isolation and of staying indoors, experiencing a loss of confidence and being fearful about going back out again. Many older people have experienced physical and mental health deterioration as a result, with consequences for their ability to live independently and for their future health and well-being.

The Welsh Government should work with health boards and other key partners to establish and deliver a rehabilitation programme for older people who have been affected physically and/or mentally by Covid-19 to ensure that the right support is available to improve people’s health and well-being and prevent any further decline.

Longer-term Actions

- Establish a major healthy ageing programme focused on supporting older people and helping people to age well.
- Expedite work to reform social care funding and ensure long-term investment in the social care sector, which properly rewards social care staff, increases the availability of services and drives up quality.
- Improve engagement with older people in the development of services, including those living in care homes, and embed and spread good practice.
- Appoint a Chief Social Care Officer in the Welsh Government to act as the head of the profession in Wales and to ensure that social care expertise is at the heart of decision making, on a par with the NHS.
- Conduct a review of spending on social care to determine whether the allocation of social care resources is age discriminatory, and take action on the findings.

Improving communication and inclusion

“So many feel disconnected, mainly because so many don’t use social media. As many times as my Group have been shown even basic use of tablets, phones, they don’t feel confident to use them when alone. This of course makes many feel discriminated against as they don’t get vital information.”

Older person at engagement event

One of the most important elements of an effective response to a pandemic is ensuring that information and advice is communicated clearly to the public and that a sense of trust is built between those leading the response and those at risk. However, many older people have told the Commissioner that they have struggled to access the information they need during the past few months, and have been left feeling confused and anxious about what they needed to do to keep themselves safe and well.

This has been a particular issue for older people who are not online, and the pandemic has highlighted a stark digital divide in Wales, as well as the significant impact that digital exclusion can have on many aspects of people’s lives. This is particularly concerning given that many public bodies have been forced by the pandemic to accelerate the introduction of digital services for the public. Whilst these kinds of services can provide better experiences for those who can access them – reducing the need to travel to an appointment, for example – they risk excluding a significant number of older people. It is therefore crucial that non-digital options remain available and accessible. Alongside this, the financial gains resulting from the reduced costs of delivering digital services should be invested into maximising digital inclusion across our communities by supporting older people to get online.