

## **Public Policy Statement**

### **The built environment in communities**

#### **October 2024**

### **Summary**

Being able to take part in community life, with good access to local services and facilities, is a lifeline for many older people. There are already high levels of loneliness and social isolation amongst older people in Wales and an inaccessible built environment that deters people from being involved 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 around us is designed and adapted in an age friendly way so that it is sustainable and suitable for people of all ages.

The Welsh Government's Strategy for an Ageing Society<sup>1</sup> recognises the World Health's Organisations's Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities and aspires for Wales to be age friendly. In 2022, Cardiff became the first local authority in Wales to join the Network.<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government must effectively monitor the Delivery Plan for the Strategy for an Ageing Society to support local authorities to drive forward the work of making Wales an age friendly nation.

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.

However, many older people come up against barriers that prevent their participation in communities, and what should be an enjoyable stage of life can become a time of loneliness and isolation.

Age Cymru's Community Calculator survey (2020)<sup>3</sup> which enabled older people across Wales to assess how age friendly is their community, highlighted that many older people face considerable barriers in the built environment on a daily basis. Many older people told us about poor access to public toilets, uneven pavements, pavements obstructed by cars, and a lack of public seating in communities.

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<sup>1</sup> [Age friendly Wales: our strategy for an ageing society \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [Age Cymru | Community Calculator \(ageuk.org.uk\)](#)

Sufficient provision of public toilets is vital to enable older people to maintain their dignity and participate in community life. Pavements in a poor condition, car parking on pavements, and street 'clutter' can be hazardous for older people and can inhibit access and pose an increased falls risk. Accessing community areas and facilities can present a substantial challenge for older people if there is nowhere to rest or to sit down.

The Community Calculator also highlighted other barriers in the built environment, including inadequate street lighting, which can impose an unacceptable restriction on many older people, and concerns over a lack of safe crossing facilities for pedestrians in some areas, especially where there is speeding traffic.

All outdoor environments and public spaces across Wales should be accessible, inclusive and usable for all older people. Safe and accessible streets, places to meet to socialise that are easily accessible by public and community transport, and adequate public seating, street lighting and public toilets in our communities 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.

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 and streetscapes throughout our communities are safe and inclusive. With local authorities experiencing 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 cuts to services 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:**

- Welsh Government must effectively monitor the Delivery Plan for the Strategy for an Ageing Society to support local authorities to drive forward the work of making Wales an age friendly nation.
- 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 local authority services and facilities must take older people's needs into account through effective engagement and consultation.

- Local authorities must provide good lighting and well-kept clean streets to help people feel more confident about getting out and about. Pavements must be well maintained and be free of obstruction.
- Local authorities should ensure that streets are safe and accessible, with the use of traffic calming measures in residential areas. Pedestrian crossings must be sufficient in number and allow people enough time to cross roads.
- Local authorities must consult and engage with members of the public and access groups over the development of shared spaces and active travel networks.
- 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, including shopping centres, parks, bus stops and other public places.
- Welsh Government should place a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide sufficient numbers of accessible public toilets across Wales.
- The implementation of local authorities' local toilet strategies should be robustly monitored and evaluated to ensure the sufficient provision of accessible toilets in communities.
- The national toilet map showing toilets identified by local authorities as available for public use should be available, accessible and publicised both online and in hard copy format for people who are not online.
- Welsh Government should monitor levels of public funding allocated to community toilet schemes to ensure stability of provision and maintenance of these important services.
- Local authorities should ensure that the community toilet scheme is better publicised and promoted,
- Local authorities should provide support to voluntary and community groups to enable and empower older people to facilitate inclusive social opportunities, including educational, social and health-related activities. Local authorities should consider innovative ways to support such activities by encouraging the use of council facilities.
- Welsh Government, local authorities and transport providers must seek to develop co-ordinated transport links to enable older people to access communities and social activities.
- 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 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.

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