



Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee:

Local Authority Library and Leisure Services

17 March 2023

Introduction

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee's consultation on Local Authority Library and Leisure Services. It is essential that library and leisure services are accessible to older people as they provide opportunities for social activities and interests, as well as important health and well-being support.

The Commissioner would like to offer comments on the specific areas set out below.

The current state of local authority leisure and library service provision

The current state of local authority library and leisure service provision across Wales differs depending on a range of issues, not least locality.¹ Accessing such services in rural parts of Wales is likely to be more difficult, especially if relying on public transport.

Libraries

Library services are the responsibility of local authorities in Wales and there is a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to deliver a 'comprehensive and efficient' service to its residents.²

The number of libraries has fallen from its 2004/5 height of 310 to 240 libraries in 2020/21.³ Research undertaken in England in 2019-20, prior to the pandemic, found that the rate of library attendance for adults between 65 and 74 was 36%, with women in general having a higher rate of attendance than men (37% vs 26%).⁴ It is likely that Wales follows similar trends. Libraries are much more than a traditional book borrowing service, playing a vital role in the community. Their roles as community hubs and centres where people of different generations can come together should also be recognised.

Leisure Services

The physical and mental health benefits of exercise are well-established, and these continue into later life. However, participation in physical activity currently decreases with age. Data from Sport Wales shows that a lower proportion of adults aged 55-64-years, 65-74-years, and 75+ years participated in at least one sport or physical activity during the previous four weeks when compared to the national average and to younger age groups.⁵ Only 49,000 people over 75 participated at least once during the previous four weeks in comparison to 144,000 people aged 65-74.

While research from Sport Wales shows that at present, the proportion of adults who have a demand for more sport and/or physical activity declines with age, 36,000 people aged 75 or over still expressed a demand for more sport and/or physical activity.⁶ Leisure centres provide facilities and a range of activities for communities, including older people. If action is not taken to protect accessible leisure facilities, not only will Wales continue to see unmet demand for sport and physical activity among older people, but there is likely to be an increase in social isolation and a decline in the health and well-being of older people.

The financial and operational challenges facing local authorities to maintain these vital community services

Library and leisure services are also being impacted by the cost-of-living crisis because of the rising cost of energy. The running costs of swimming pools alone are reported to have risen by as much as threefold.⁷ A survey of ukactive's membership found that across the UK, three quarters (74%) of council areas are classified as

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'unsecure', meaning there is risk of the closure of leisure centres and/or reduced services before 31 March 2024. In the immediate term, 40% of UK council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centre(s) or seeing reduced services at their leisure centre(s) before 31 March 2023.⁸ While the survey does not provide insights at a Wales level, this still suggests a concerning trend in terms of facilities and services being under threat. This is worrying as it would mean reduced access to familiar and accessible spaces for older people to exercise.

Leisure services also provide opportunities for exercise and social interaction. Research by Sport Wales shows that the second most common activity that adults wanted to do more of was fitness classes, where 115,000 adults said they wanted to participate more. While an age breakdown is not currently available, older people will constitute part of this demand and leisure services frequently provide access to a range of different fitness classes.⁹

Being able to keep active is crucial in enabling everyone to age well. Leisure services can also play a part in falls prevention among older people with some offering classes aimed at developing the strength and balance needed to reduce the risk of falling.¹⁰ Roughly 132,000 older people in Wales will fall more than once in their home, whilst 8,100 older people will suffer a serious injury, requiring a hospital visit as a result of a fall and accessible leisure services have a role to play in helping to reduce this number.¹¹

Older people must not unfairly bear the burden of cuts to library and leisure services. Local authorities are subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty and must have due regard to this when carrying out their functions.¹² When public spending is reduced, difficult financial decisions have to be made by public authorities but the effect on groups with protected characteristics, including age, must be taken into account. Equality impact assessments are a way of showing that the effects of policy change have been properly considered.¹³ Local authorities need to be able to demonstrate that they have considered the impact on older people of any reductions to services. Publishing the equality information that is used to inform decisions, including any

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equality impact assessments, before changes are implemented will improve transparency.

How the provision of other services provided by local authorities interact with leisure and library services

Digital inclusion and provision of information for those who are not online

Digital inclusion activity provided or hosted by local authorities interacts with libraries which can act as venues for skills transmission. As more services take a digital by default approach, libraries play a crucial role in building digital skills among older people and already provide access to information and support services. Research has shown that 31% of over 75s do not have access to the internet at home and 33% of over 75s do not use the internet (including Smart TV and handheld devices), compared to 13% of 65-74s and 0% of 25-44s.¹⁴ The role of libraries in supporting digital skills development needs to be maintained. This will enable older people who wish to develop skills to be online to access formal or informal training in a welcoming and familiar environment, helping to improve digital inclusion. However, libraries also act as sources of information and support for those older people who are unable or choose not to access the internet, reducing digital exclusion and this activity is essential.

The role of libraries in supporting the provision of information to older people and acting as places where people can access the internet is likely to become increasingly important. As the cost-of-living crisis continues to negatively impact household budgets, research suggests that some people are reducing internet and broadband services. Research from the Good Things Foundations found that over one in 20 households have no internet at all.¹⁵ Research by Ofcom shows that 32% of UK households were having problems paying for their phone, broadband, pay-TV, and streaming bills.¹⁶ Older people are among those making difficult spending decisions and are likely to be among those cutting back on internet access. This could lead to an increase in levels of social isolation among older people as well as undermining existing digital skills and confidence. Therefore, library and leisure

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services need to be safeguarded to help older people access information, and where appropriate build confidence and develop skills in using the internet safely.

Age-friendly communities

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes Age-Friendly communities as being places in which older people, communities, policies, services, settings and structures work together in partnership to support and enable us all to age well. Library and leisure services fit across multiple areas of the eight domains covered within the World Health Organisation's Age-friendly communities which are:

- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Transport
- Housing
- Social participation
- Respect and social inclusion
- Civic participation and employment
- Communication and information
- Community support and health services.¹⁷

Libraries and leisure services act as spaces where people of all ages can socialise and find and share information, contributing to well-being and participation in community life.

In April 2022, the Welsh Government announced that £1.1 million was being made available to local authorities to support their work to become age friendly and ensure older people are involved in the design and planning of local services.¹⁸ This should continue to include library and leisure services. Support for existing library and leisure services, combined with ongoing development of new and innovative approaches to service provision, is crucial to ensure that Wales sees a reduction in social isolation and improved opportunity for social and civic participation for older

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people. The steps local authorities across Wales have taken to become more age-friendly to date are welcome. Local authorities need to continue to safeguard and develop further community spaces to support age-friendly communities across Wales.

Transport

Local authorities play a key role in transport provision and planning. It is important that older people have easy access to any service they may need, and this includes library and leisure services across Wales. Research from Age Cymru back in 2013 showed the importance of bus services: many older people rely completely on buses to live their daily lives.¹⁹ The key findings from that report remain relevant as challenges including scarcity of services, changes to provision and accessibility continue to be highlighted to the Commissioner. The ongoing impact of Covid-19 on transport provision, including bus services, has serious consequences for older people's ability to undertake day to day activities, whether for recreation or necessity.

Data for the financial year ending in 2018 shows that across the UK, for households with only one adult who is retired and mainly dependent on state pensions, only 43% owned at least one car or van.²⁰ This means that over half of these households do not own their own vehicle. Public transport is vital to their ability to travel beyond their individual walking distance.

With the Welsh Government's subsidy for bus providers set to end in summer 2023,²¹ it will be essential to ensure any detrimental impact on older people is minimised. This is especially the case for older people who live in rural areas where, because of the fall in passenger numbers since the pandemic,²² it may no longer be profitable for companies to run rural services as frequently or at all. This will only serve to disconnect older people from vital public services, such as libraries and leisure services.

Local authorities already work with operators, Welsh Government, the Community Transport Association and other stakeholders to provide a bus network.²³ A well-planned public transport system enables people of all ages to access libraries and

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leisure services. It is essential that local authorities continue to engage directly with older people to ensure their needs and wishes are reflected when designing, planning and changing bus routes in their areas.

As with proposed changes to the location and opening hours of library and leisure centres, local authorities must ensure that they are meeting their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty, including assessing the impact on older people, when making changes to bus service provision that could affect older people's ability to reach leisure and library services. Public transport routes and timetables need to enable access to these services.

The creation of hubs which bring together several services, and where they prevent a local service from being closed permanently, is welcomed as it allows for the provision of library and leisure services to be preserved within a community. If hubs in new sites are created, cooperation between local authorities and local transport providers is essential to ensure that older people can still access leisure and library services via public transport.

Alternative models of delivery and good practice

It is important to ensure that local library and leisure services are sustainable in a challenging financial climate. This means exploring alternative ways of providing services to communities that continue to meet the needs of communities, including older people.

Alternative models of service provision should be explored, including collaboration and co-location with other services. One good practice example of this can be seen at the Bridgend Life Centre, a single venue that provides health, fitness, and library services in a convenient location, enabling residents to access a wide range of opportunities to support their physical, mental and social wellbeing together. This facility is operated by a social enterprise, in partnership with the local council and health board, accepting GP referrals and can provide on-site services in response.²⁴

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Conclusion and recommendations

Libraries and leisure services provide crucial venues for taking part in social activities and interests, alongside services and activities for maintaining and improving the health and well-being of older people in Wales and reducing loneliness. Proposals to reduce services, whether by cutting hours or closing premises, risk older people across Wales losing access to the wide range of activities offered by libraries and leisure services: advice centres providing help and information, welcome hubs providing physical and emotional warmth, and accessible spaces within which opportunities for learning, social interaction and physical activity can take place, all of which are essential for health and well-being. Such a loss will make places less age-friendly, contrary to the ambitions of both the Welsh Government and local government, and to the detriment of older people and communities.

The Commissioner recommends:

- Local authorities publish the equality information that helps inform decisions around changes or cuts to leisure and library services, including any equality impact assessments, to demonstrate that they have considered the impact on older people in line with their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty. This should include any mitigations identified.
- Local authorities ensure that library and leisure services are allocated specific funding to maintain current provision as far as possible, especially as community spaces are vital to age-friendly communities.
- Local authorities explore alternative models of service provision as well as co-working with other services, to help keep local leisure and library services open.
- Cooperation takes place between the Welsh Government, local authorities and local transport providers to ensure that older people can access leisure and library services via public transport, including any new sites, especially in light of the planned withdrawal of emergency support to the bus industry.

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Notes

¹ CILIP, undated, Libraries in Wales, [Libraries in Wales - CILIP: the library and information association](#)

² Welsh Government, 2017, how good is your public library service. Available at: [how-good-is-your-public-library-service-a-summary-guide-to-the-performance-measurement-and-assessment-framework-for-public-libraries-in-wales.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#), p. 3.

³ Welsh Government, April 2022, FOI release 16166: Public libraries. Available at: [FOI release 16166: Public libraries | GOV.WALES](#)

⁴ The Reading Agency, undated, Library facts. Available at: [Library facts | Reading Agency](#)

⁵ Sports Wales, 2022, Sport and Active Lifestyle Survey Report. Available at: [Sport and Active Lifestyle Survey Report](#), p. 17.

⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷ Swim Wales, January 2023, Save Our Pools Campaign. Available at: <https://www.swimwales.org/news/save-our-pools-campaign-launched/>

⁸ Survey undertaken by ukactive: the survey was sent to all UK public sector leisure operators within ukactive's membership, with the number of respondents representing more than a third of all UK leisure centres and swimming pools. See: UKActive, undated, Forty per cent of council areas at risk of leisure centre and swimming pool closures. Available at: [Forty per cent of council areas at risk of leisure centre and swimming pool closures and restrictions before April without immediate support | ukactive](#)

⁹ Sports Wales, 2022, Sport and Active Lifestyle Survey Report. Available at: [Sport and Active Lifestyle Survey Report](#), p.36.

¹⁰ See, for example, Better, which operates leisure centres on behalf of Cardiff Council: Better UK, undated, Healthwise Physical Activity Referral. Available at: [Healthwise Physical Activity Referral | Better UK](#)

¹¹ Care & Repair Cymru, January 2023, State of Older People's Housing in Wales. Available at: [Care & Repair english WEB.pdf - Google Drive](#), p.14.

¹² The Public Sector Equality Duty came into force in April 2011. See: UK Government, July 2022, Public sector equality duty. Available at: [Public sector equality duty - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

¹³ The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced materials to support equality impact assessments in decision making. See: EHRC, undated, Equality impact assessments. Available at: [Equality impact assessments | Equality and Human Rights Commission \(equalityhumanrights.com\)](#)

¹⁴ Older People's Commissioner for Wales, August 2022, Understanding Wales' ageing population. Available at [Understanding Wales' ageing population 23 August \(1\).pdf](#)

¹⁵ House of Lords, 22 February 2023, How do we solve digital exclusion in a cost of living crisis? Available at: [Committees - UK Parliament](#)

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ WHO, undated, Age Friendly World. Available at: [The WHO Age-friendly Cities Framework - Age-Friendly World](#)

¹⁸ Welsh Government, April 2022, £1.1m investment to champion older people as Wales becomes Age Friendly. Available at: [£1.1 million investment to champion older people as Wales becomes Age Friendly | GOV.WALES](#)

¹⁹ Age Cymru, December 2013, Buses a Lifeline for Older People. Available at: [buses---a-lifeline-for-older-people.pdf \(ageuk.org.uk\)](#)

²⁰ ONS, January 2019, Percentage of households with cars. Available at: [Percentage of households with cars by income group, tenure and household composition: Table A47 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

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²¹ Welsh Government, February 2023. Joint Statement Bus Emergency Scheme. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/joint-statement-bus-emergency-scheme>

²² Senedd Cymru, 15 February 2023, Plenary, Topical Questions, Available at: <https://record.senedd.wales/Plenary/13221#A77882>

²³ WLGA, undated, Transport. Available at: <https://www.wlga.wales/transport>

²⁴ Halo Leisure, undated. Available at: <https://haloleisure.org.uk/centres/bridgend/bridgend-life-centre>

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people throughout Wales.

The Commissioner is taking action to protect older people's rights, end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner is working for a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld, and no-one is left behind.

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