



Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

How to avoid ageism in communications

Practical tips for professionals



An independent voice and champion
for older people

How to avoid ageism in communications

One of the ways in which we can all tackle ageism is through the language and terminology we use, which can impact on how people think, feel and react to what we are saying. This guide is designed to help you avoid ageism when communicating.

To avoid ageism in your communications, it is important to consider the language, terminology and tone we use. The ways that communications are framed, and the images used in communications all have an impact, and the sections below set out some good practice for avoiding ageism in communications.

What is ageism and why is it important?

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's age and is one of the most prevalent forms of discrimination. The recent global report¹ on ageism from the World Health Organisation defined ageism as how we think (stereotypes), feel (prejudice) and act (discrimination) towards others or ourselves based on age.

Ageism underpins many of the issues currently faced by older people in Wales and results in negative stereotypes, older people being treated unfairly, and rights not being respected and upheld.

Ageism can also negatively influence the decisions made by society, meaning that the services, facilities and opportunities that we all need to enable us to age well can be inadequate and discriminate against older people.

A growing body of research indicates that ageism has a wide range of negative impacts upon older people, affecting physical and mental health, memory function, recovery from illness, levels of social exclusion and even life expectancy.



Ageism is everywhere

- 1 in 2 people worldwide are ageist against older people²
- Ageism affects us throughout life and exists in society (which includes organisations, workplaces, the media), our relationships and ourselves
- Ageism intersects and exacerbates other forms of disadvantage including those related to sex, race and disability

Ageism is harmful

- It has far-reaching impacts on all aspects of our health and wellbeing
- It takes a heavy economic toll on individuals and society

Ending ageism in Wales

A key focus of the Commissioner's work

Ending ageism and age discrimination is one of the Commissioner's core priorities and she is taking a range of action to drive change and deliver improvements:

- Providing training for older people and professionals to empower them to recognise and challenge ageism
- Challenging examples of ageism and age discrimination, including the way older people are portrayed in the media
- Working with partners – including international partners – to tackle ageist attitudes in society and promote solidarity between generations

Welsh Government Strategy for an Ageing Society

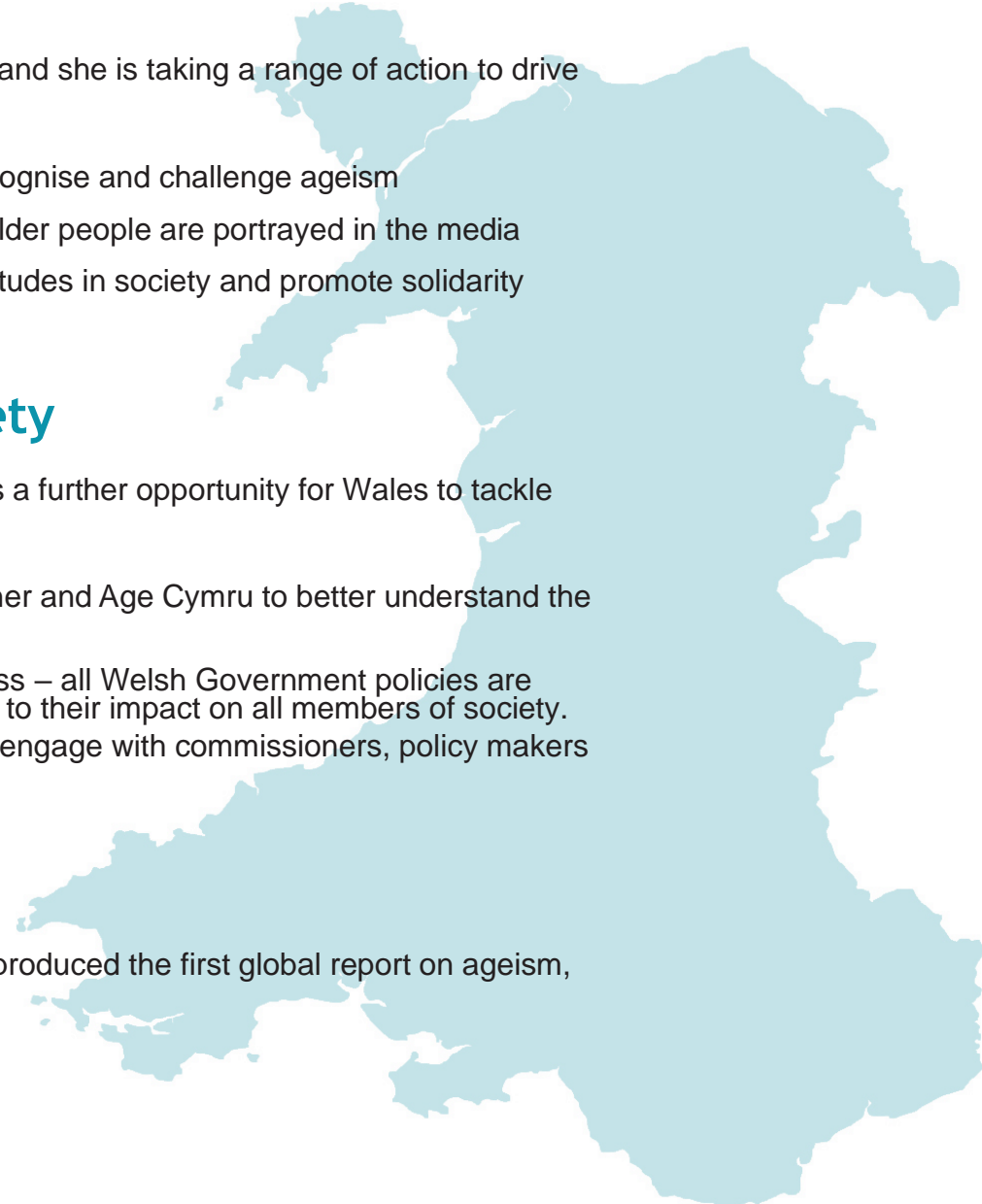
The publication of the Welsh Government's Strategy for an Ageing Society provides a further opportunity for Wales to tackle ageism and age discrimination, and aims to:

- Make Wales more equal through a commitment to work with the Commissioner and Age Cymru to better understand the causes and impact of ageism and age discrimination
- Identify ageism and age discrimination through the policy assessment process – all Welsh Government policies are subject to a full Integrated impact assessment, which gives full consideration to their impact on all members of society. The Welsh Government is reviewing the integrated assessment tool and will engage with commissioners, policy makers and stakeholders

A global perspective

Alongside the action highlighted about, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has produced the first global report on ageism, which identifies three strategies for combatting ageism. These include:

- Policy and law interventions
- Educational interventions
- Intergenerational connections





Practical tips to avoid ageism in communications

Using the right language and terminology

It is crucial that we use the right language and terminology when communicating about older people, whether in writing or orally. Choose words that are respectful and avoid using words that stigmatise or patronise older people.

Below are some examples of words to avoid and suggestions of words to use. Where possible, it's best to ask people what term(s) they prefer.

Instead of...	Try to use...
Old person/people Elderly Pensioners Senior citizen/s OAP 	Older person/people or Older adult/adults 

You should also avoid terms such as 'demographic timebomb', 'silver tsunami' or 'boomer', and should avoid generalisations about generations, such as older people being better off - there is inequality and disadvantage across and within all generations.

Avoid 'othering' older people

The language we use can increase the sense of difference and division between groups of people in society, which can lead to inequality, and people being excluded or dehumanised.

This is known as 'othering'.

Where possible, avoid using pronouns like 'they' and 'them', which can portray older people as being a separate group and not part of our society.

Instead, try to use more inclusive language and find ways to replace 'they' or 'them' with words like 'we' or 'us'. For example, instead of saying 'What older people need', say 'What we need when we're older'.

Framing our communications

The way that information is presented – positive, negative or neutral – influences how an audience may think and feel about an issue, which is why the way we frame our communications is important, particularly in terms of the way we describe growing older and ageing.

Growing older is often framed as something to be fearful of, and there is often a disproportionate focus on ill-health, frailty and decline, which does not reflect the experiences of many older people. Similarly, older people are often presented as being both a financial and social burden, despite the fact this does not reflect the significant contribution older people make to society.

Instead, there should be a greater focus on ageing as something that is seen as part of our life course and something we should embrace – growing older is the one thing that unites us all, after all.

Similarly, living longer should be something that is celebrated, and the contributions that older people make – through working longer, volunteering, and caring – should be recognised.

We should aim to ensure that the way we frame growing older and ageing in our communications reflects the diversity of older people and the breadth of our experiences as we get older.



A picture paints a thousand words

Like language, images influence how we think, feel and react to what we see. Images that portray older people as weak, vulnerable, in ill-health, or as victims can lead to stereotyping behaviour and ignores the diversity of older people.

Be realistic and relevant when selecting images – you should represent the diversity of older people while avoiding stereotyping and prejudice in images you select.

For example, images that show a pair of wrinkly hands are commonly used in news articles about older people. This means we do not see the individual, something that dehumanises older people and can lead to older people being treated as a homogenous group.

To help end the use of inappropriate images of older people, the Centre for Ageing Better has created a library of free images you can use in your work (a link can be found in the resources section below). There are also several websites that offer free stock photos of older people that you can use.



Resources

Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Taking Action Against Ageism Information Booklet:
<https://olderpeoplewales.com/en/ageism/action.aspx>

Portrayal of Older People in News Media report (2021):
https://olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/Portrayal_of_Older_People_in_News_Media.sflb.ashx

Centre for Ageing Better

Centre for Ageing Better Image and Icon Library:
<https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com/pages/home.php>

Other free stock photos

Pexels:
<https://www.pexels.com/>

Pixabay:
<https://pixabay.com/>

Unsplash:
<https://unsplash.com/>

References

¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>

² ibid

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.

How to contact the Commissioner:

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