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Chair, Local Government and Housing Committee
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Rydym yn croesawu
galwadau yn Gymraeg

Adeiladau Cambrian
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Caerdydd CF10 5FL

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17 September 2021

Dear Chair,

Re: Priorities for the Local Government and Housing Committee

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views on what the Committee's priorities should be for the Sixth Senedd and what areas need be considered during the next 12 months, including the impact of the Covid-19 and our transition into recovery.

Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions that have been necessary to curtail its spread have had a significant and disproportionate impact on older people. This impact is felt both by those that have sadly lost their lives to the virus and those that grieve for them, as well as by those affected mentally and physically by the restrictions and changes made to our daily lives, including those living with on-going symptoms of Covid-19 and those who have had care and treatment delayed by the pandemic.

It is crucial that this impact is properly recognised across government and our public services to ensure that appropriate support and rehabilitation services are available to those that need them. Many thousands of older people will have diligently followed the rules set out by the Welsh Government over the last 18 months and will be feeling the impact on their physical and mental health from not having proper contact with their families and friends, not being able to get out and about in their communities and the fear of what catching the virus may mean for them.

The road to recovery

Over the summer of 2020, the Welsh Government began a programme of work around the recovery and reconstruction of our society following the pandemic. It was rightly recognised

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

at the time that existing inequalities had been exacerbated by the pandemic and that fundamental change was needed as we move forward as a society.

This narrative on recovery and reconstruction has faded in recent months as focus has increasingly turned to dealing with the spread of the virus and rolling out the vaccine to those most at risk.

We must not miss the opportunity over the next twelve months to re-focus on that narrative as we look to how the Welsh Government, working with local government, can use all available avenues to build age-friendly communities throughout Wales, which will also mean improving local services and environments.

In my report '*Leave No-one Behind*', which I published in August 2020, I set out a series of short term and longer-term actions that are required to ensure an age-friendly recovery from Covid-19 that has older people at its heart and that values and grows the contribution that older people make to our communities and our economy¹.

In the report, I called on local authorities to work with older people to undertake age-friendly audits of their local communities and to continue to work towards becoming recognised by the World Health Organisation as members of the age-friendly communities' network. I welcome the fact that this is also reflected in the Welsh Governments soon to be published *Strategy for an Ageing Society: age friendly Wales*².

Prior to the pandemic some local authorities had started working with my team on that journey towards recognition and I am very pleased that a growing number of authorities are now becoming engaged and seeing it as a positive way to strengthen our communities.

Most importantly is the growing awareness that co-operation and collaboration across many local and central government policy areas that impact on an individual's life are required when looking to support our communities to become places where everybody can age well, maintain their independence, dignity, and well-being.

Only by collaborating across areas such as housing, transport, community support and health services can plans for age-friendly communities be collectively created. Communities themselves must be supported to play a key role in this, with clear communication and information about developments and available services and activities necessary to enable participation, co-creation and access.

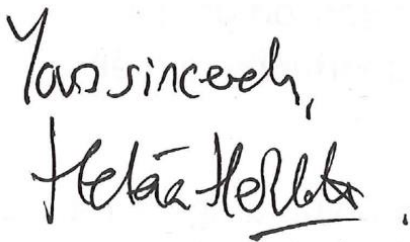
Similarly, the planning and development of new green spaces and community infrastructure, including ensuring the availability of public toilets can improve opportunities for getting out and about, encourage social participation, enhance community cohesion and facilitate intergenerational activities. These also reflect on the wider principles outlined by the WHO's age-friendly communities' domains.³

The committee could consider reviewing the issue of the availability of public toilets, particularly considering the experience of the pandemic, where previous local plans had been overly reliant on accessing toilets in existing public buildings, something that became impossible as services closed. The Committee could scrutinise the success or otherwise of those local toilet strategies and consider whether stronger steps are required.

I have previously called for the Public Health (Wales) Act to be revisited and a duty being placed on local authorities and the Welsh Government to ensure and maintain an adequate provision of toilets for public use throughout Wales.

Local authorities working to build back and strengthen our communities will also need to rethink the purpose of some of their town centres and the Welsh Government's work on *Transforming Towns* will be integral to that discussion.⁴ The programme needs to recognise the importance of age-friendly communities as part of this transformation and look at how town centres in turn can support older people to re-engage with their communities.

I hope that these comments are helpful. If I can be of any further assistance, please don't hesitate to contact George Jones, my Community Services and Inclusion Lead, on 03442 640 670 or by emailing george.jones@olderpeoplewales.com

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yours sincerely, Heléna Herklots". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Heléna Herklots CBE
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

¹ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2020) *Leave No-one Behind: Action for an age-friendly recovery*. Available at: https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/Publications/pub-story/20-08-18/Leave_no-one_behind_Action_for_an_age-friendly_recovery.aspx [Accessed 24 August 2021]

² Welsh Government (2020) *Strategy for an ageing society: age friendly Wales* Available at: <https://gov.wales/strategy-ageing-society-age-friendly-wales> [Accessed 24 August 2021].

³ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2019) *What makes a community age-friendly?*. Available at: <https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/ageing-well/afcs/what-makes-a-community-age-friendly.aspx> [Accessed 24 August 2021]

⁴ Welsh Government (2020) *Transforming Towns: support to improve town centres*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/support-improve-town-centres> [Accessed 24 August 2021]