



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

Preparation and flair could bridge older people's housing gap in Wales

Written by Jeremy Porteus, founder and director of the Housing LIN (Learning and Improvement Network)

It's a fair bet that Wales will have done its homework on the big challenges it faces in the Rugby World Cup now entering its second week.

Finding itself in the so-called 'Group of Death', the leaders of the Welsh campaign will have been filtering information and planning every move for several years.

Such information-gathering and careful planning provide a pretty good foundation for responding to the less high-profile – but even more important – housing implications of an ageing population.

This week's Public Policy Institute for Wales report¹ on that issue shines a welcome spotlight on the need to inform and educate both the public and a range of professionals and sectors.

In Wales, as in the rest of the UK, there is a real need to encourage older people and their families to think about the type of housing they want to live in as their needs change. However, any economist will tell you that participants in any market need intelligence on all the options available. Where that market relates to care and support options - as well as bricks and mortar - they also need accurate and up-to-date advice on the issues they should be considering when making choices.

My organisation, the Housing LIN has been highlighting the need for high quality advice and information (A&I) services for people for many years. We work closely with such services at a national level while seeking to influence local authorities into maintaining or expanding local, face-to-face services advising their older residents and their families or carers on the best options for them.

¹ Housing for Older People in Wales: An Evidence Review (2015)

http://www.housinglin.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Report_Housing_for_Older_People_in_Wales_Evidence_Review_FINAL.pdf

In England, this education and information role received powerful backing from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People in their 2011 report, following their 'Living well at home'² enquiry.

Given the importance of the decisions older people (and those in late middle-age) face, it is surprising and frustrating that trusted services providing I&A on housing and care remain so fragmented and under-developed. This means many people only receive such advice in a crisis situation - for example, after a bad fall at home or the death of a carer. In such circumstances, the default position is all-too-often residential care: an expensive option too often foisted on individuals who are still capable of living independently.

This goes beyond talking about the bricks and mortar of downsizing. People need to know whether aids and adaptations to their home could allow them to remain in situ for many years. If that is not practicable, they need to be aware of the differing levels of care and support that different types of specialist housing offer – and the levels of independence they can enjoy in each.

These I&A services should also emphasise the links between housing, health and social care that can help people to continue living with the maximum independence possible. This means explaining the benefits that new and innovative products such as telecare and telehealth can also bring.

However, this week's report suggests that a lot of work is needed to provide the range of housing options that older people will rightly increasingly aspire to. It's encouraging that, in this regard, the report urges policymakers, commissioners and providers to look outside Wales – to England and beyond.

The Housing LIN has already been commissioned by the Welsh Government to provide commissioners, professionals and developers with the tools and information to stimulate new housing types and developments.

Our dedicated Housing LIN Cymru webpages³ offers a wealth of evidence, good practice, innovation and tools that can identify gaps in specialist housing provision and inspire Welsh local authorities and their partners to start filling them. Just within local authorities the scope for change is massive: this goes beyond housing and adult social care departments. It reaches into town planning teams and economic development units looking for solutions that can regenerate urban and/or rural communities.

²

http://www.housinglin.org.uk/library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Other_reports_and_guidance/living-well-at-home.pdf

³ <http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Wales/>

Councils should also be making the case to the NHS about the role that appropriate housing for older people can play in reducing demand for health services and expediting rapid discharge home of older patients; a significant issue for acute and community health services in Wales.

They should be working with both private and third sector developers to provide accessible, well-designed housing. Returning to the theme that information is both power and the foundation of sensible action, local authorities should look to our free, online resource that helps councils and their partners to predict likely shortfalls in supply of particular types of accommodation. We have adapted SHOP@⁴, which English councils have been using for several years, to help Welsh councils and their partners forecast likely demand.

It's startling, for example, there are now just over 2,000 extra care housing flats across Wales, an increase of 11% from last year but still short of the estimated 10,000 needed by 2030.

Speaking as someone who lives just over the other side of the Severn Bridge, it would be great if our approach to tackling that challenge is as inventive and creative as the approach the Welsh famously take to their rugby. It's worth more than a try!

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⁴ <http://www.housinglin.org.uk/SHOPAT/>