



### **Housing for older people: Making it a national priority in Wales**

*Written by Sarah Rochira, Older People's Commissioner for Wales*

In recent years, debates and discussions about housing, and in particular the vital role our homes play in our health and wellbeing, have made a welcome move up the policy agenda in Wales.

There is a strong and growing body of evidence that clearly demonstrates the positive impact that housing can have on the lives of older people. Well-designed, well-located and high quality housing not only helps to ensure that older people can remain connected to their communities, but also helps to support people's independence and mobility, essential to prevent issues such as falls and cold home-related illnesses, and thus reducing the need for home care support and the level of unnecessary admissions into hospitals or care homes.

In contrast, inappropriate housing can lead to social isolation, falls, illnesses, fuel poverty and preventable winter deaths.

Many of these issues can often be addressed with timely home adaptations, but many older people have told me that the waiting times or costs for adaptations can be prohibitive, and that information and advice, which provides much-needed support, is often difficult to access or simply not available. Similarly, many older people who are proactively looking to move home encounter a severe lack of choice or availability of appropriate and/or adaptable accommodation within their communities.

This means that many older people are 'getting by' in unsuitable housing and may be forced to live somewhere that they would not have chosen, or even considered, should a crisis occur that means they have to move home.

In addition to ensuring that housing stock itself meets the needs of older people, it is also essential that there is a broader focus on ensuring that communities are age-friendly, which is a key priority of Ageing Well in Wales, the national partnership programme to help to improve the health and wellbeing of older people, which I Chair and is hosted by my office.

The second phase of Ageing Well in Wales, which began in October last year, has an increased emphasis on age-friendly planning and housing, with work underway to explore how the local Ageing Well plans developed by Welsh Local Authorities will be used alongside Local Development Plans to ensure that the role of housing in delivering age-friendly and dementia-supportive communities is not overlooked.

It is also essential that the protection and development of community services (e.g. public transport, libraries, and community centres) and the built environment (e.g.

public seating and toilets, well-maintained and lit pavements) goes hand in hand with the development and improvement of housing. Older people's health, wellbeing and independence will not be improved if housing is appropriate and accessible, but they are unable to leave their homes or engage with their communities.

Recent legislation also has a key role to play and must work alongside existing frameworks to better understand and act upon the housing needs and aspirations of older people. For example, Local Wellbeing Plans (which will be produced as a result of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act), population needs assessments (introduced under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act) and the pre-existing local housing market assessment should be brought together to improve knowledge and understanding around current housing and social care needs, and assess what these needs are likely to be in the future. This approach will help to ensure that action is taken that leads to the development of attractive, appropriate homes that older people want to live in that support their wellbeing, independence and ability to contribute to their local economies and communities.

As Commissioner, I have been clear that the importance of housing cannot be underestimated. Housing must continue to be a national priority for Wales and should be considered just as important as health and social care, two areas that have traditionally received far greater attention and focus when considering the quality of life of older people.

That is why I was pleased when the 'Expert Group on Housing an Ageing Population' was convened by the Welsh Government in 2015 to advise on practical steps that can be taken to ensure that housing remains high on the policy agenda in Wales. The group's report, 'Our Housing AGEnda: meeting the housing aspirations of older people', which is available [here](#), will help to ensure that we get housing right for older people, which is vital to ensure that Wales can deliver upon its ambition to make Wales a great place to grow older.

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