

Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-01-09 (p1): 20 January 2009

Inquiry into Home Maintenance and Adaptations Services for Older People in Wales

Introduction and Background

The role of the Older People's Commissioner for Wales is underpinned by the UN Principles for Older Persons. These principles state that:

Older persons should be able to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities'.

Older persons should be able to reside at home for as long as possible.

Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security.

The Commissioner's main responsibility is to seek out the views of older people and act in their best interests. Our legal powers enable us to investigate, scrutinise and challenge most public bodies in Wales, working to ensure that bureaucracy is not a barrier to entitlement, service and compassion.

The Commission believes that the right to a safe, warm and affordable home is a basic human right. We want people to be safe and confident in their home and whatever services are offered must not undermine that confidence. We are concerned that older people are supported in maintaining their homes and also receive assistance when mobility adaptations are required to promote safety and independence.

Issues

The experiences of older people

The Commission has heard both positive and negative stories from older people about their housing situations and service experiences. Many older people want to live their lives independently at home. That is not to say that they do not want help and advice but they want sufficient and appropriate advice to allow them to live their lives as independently as possible and where they are making the decisions.

We have evidence of older people living in unacceptable conditions, sometimes prolonged by ongoing disputes with contractors, local authorities or other agencies. The question that must be asked is 'How can these situations be resolved quickly and satisfactorily so that older people's interests are protected?'

The Commission has also heard many positive things about existing maintenance and adaptation services that tell us they can be very effective and are highly appreciated. Such feedback from older people themselves is invaluable, and must underpin any assessment as to whether the services are fit for purpose. Service providers and policy makers must listen to the experiences and concerns of older people and respond in a way that improves the service from the user's perspective.

Discrimination

It is vital that the nature of tenure doesn't disadvantage individuals, particularly with relevance to Local Authorities and social landlord obligations for their stock to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standards by 2012. The provision of adaptation and maintenance services must be according to need, and provision must be made for homeowners and private tenants, as well as those in social housing.

It is also important to ensure that the system doesn't discriminate against older people in favour of the younger population - that older people's needs are assessed fairly and their quality of life equally valued.

The Welsh Housing Quality Standards go some way to ensure that people are treated with dignity and respect but care must be taken in providing services that satisfy not only the requirements of regulations and standards but also meet the needs of the individual.

Allocation of resources

The financial allocations from the Welsh Assembly Government to local authorities for home improvements should be ring-fenced, and not lost to other policy areas within the authority. Wherever you are in Wales you should be able to easily access those funds allocated by government.

Steps must be taken to future proof the allocation of resources. As Wales' population profile changes, we need to ensure that we have sufficient resources to meet demand for adaptation and maintenance services. Demographic profiles and future projections should be borne in mind when allocating resources, so that funding is distributed according to need.

Waiting times

A prompt and efficient maintenance and adaptations service has the potential to alleviate pressures in other parts of the public services, for example reducing hospital admissions as a result of falls or illnesses exacerbated by a cold or damp home; or freeing up hospital beds by enabling people to return home more quickly.

The effect of prolonged waiting times on an older person's quality of life can be significant and every effort should be made to reduce delays.

Whilst the introduction of Local Authority targets and a statutory Performance Indicator for the implementation of Disabled Facilities grants can help drive better delivery, it also highlights differences between authorities. Striving for consistency in the service across Wales is important.

Access to advice and information

In addition to referrals from health and social services, it is vital that older people have access to clear information about what services are available and how they can access them. There is great diversity in the availability and accessibility of advice provision across Wales, and the challenge is to ensure that the information and support reaches the older people who need it.

Promotion of good practice and innovation

How are the Assembly Government maximising opportunities to promote best practice and innovation? Following the Welsh Assembly Government's 2005 Review of Housing Adaptations seminars were held to raise awareness of the outcomes and share best practice.

Consideration should be given as to whether it would be timely for WAG to re-run such seminars, perhaps in partnership with WLGA's Excellence Wales initiative, bringing together recent developments in Wales and good practice from further afield.

Is there a role for the wider community in helping to achieve safe and comfortable homes for older people? Are there example of innovative projects in the third sector that could be replicated or piloted with WAG support?

Recommendations

That the views and experiences of older people are heard as integral to any review of home adaptation and maintenance services;

Discrimination on the basis of housing tenure, or in favour of younger applicants, must be avoided;

Financial allocations to local authorities for home improvements must be ring-fenced and future proofed according to demographic projections;

Waiting times must be reduced and a consistent service delivered across Wales;

Further efforts must be made to meet the advice and information needs of people across Wales;

Best practice and innovation in this field should be promoted through Assembly government-led seminars;

The Assembly government should explore the role of the wider community and third sector in developing innovative solutions that help achieve safe and comfortable homes.

Conclusion

As we are all growing older we must ensure that we are able to live our lives in a safe and healthy environment and this is most important for people who wish to remain at home.

Decent living conditions for all people must act as the cornerstone of all government policy aimed at the services for older people.