

Participation in Sport in Disadvantaged Areas

March 2022

Introduction

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner welcomes the Committee's inquiry and believes that enabling older people to keep physically and mentally active is an important part of ensuring everyone in Wales is able to age well.

Older People and Sport

Keeping fit and active is an important part of living a healthy and fulfilling life into older age. Taking part in sport and regular physical activity lowers the risk of developing long term chronic conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers, as well as lowering the risk of early death by up to 30%.¹ Alongside these physical benefits, sport can also help a person's mental health by easing their anxiety and reducing the risk of experiencing loneliness and isolation. It can help rebuild a person's confidence after a long period of ill-health or isolation – something many older people have recently experienced because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sports clubs are at the heart of many of our communities across Wales and as well as providing opportunities to participate in sport, many older people who are unable to take part in sport proactively have become staples of their club in a different way, for example, as a volunteer, groundskeeper, steward, or simply even a fan who watches their team each week. This gives many a sense of community that is positive for their physical and mental well-being, as well as combating loneliness and isolation.

Through her engagement with older people, the Commissioner and her team has heard directly about the positive physical and social effects that sport has on many people's lives. Unfortunately however, only 25% of those aged 65-74 in Wales participate in sporting

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activities three or more times a week – a figure that goes down to 10% for those aged over 75.² This submission will focus on how these low levels of participation need to be addressed and the need to challenge the ageist assumptions that are made about older people and sport to increase participation.

Poverty

Nearly 1 in 5 older people in Wales live in relative income poverty³, which can lead to them being unable to make ends meet, causing constant stress and forcing older people to make difficult decisions. It also means that they may find it more difficult to adopt healthy behaviours, significantly impacting on their health and well-being. Older people living in the most deprived areas of Wales who turn 60 years old can expect to live seven years less in good health compared to those in the least deprived areas.⁴

The lack of available data makes it difficult to understand the connection between disadvantaged areas and the physical activity of older people. Although the National Survey for Wales provides a breakdown of participation in sport by both age and households in material deprivation⁵, it is not possible to analyse the intersection between these areas. Sufficient data is important to provide a reliable picture of disadvantaged older people across Wales who participate in sport. In addition, there is also a lack of available data and information about older people with other protected characteristics, including gender and ethnicity.

Age-friendly Communities

One of the key barriers facing older people's participation in sport is their own physical health and fitness - 31% of people aged over 65 in Wales have noted that they would do more sport if they were fitter.⁶ To begin to address this fundamental issue, we must look beyond sport to whether the communities that older people live in are enabling them to get out and about and maintain a level of physical activity and fitness.

Currently, 55% of those aged between 65-74 say they never walk more than 10 minutes to get somewhere, which rises to 68% for those aged 75 and over.⁷ Whilst for some older people, this will be due to an illness or health condition, it can also be down to whether their local environment is one that supports them to get out and about.

The Commissioner is leading work to support local authorities to become members of the World Health Organisation's Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities, and to take action to make their communities more accessible and age-friendly. By building communities and environments that enable older people to get out and about on a regular basis, we can start to build up this level of physical health and fitness.

Engaging with older people about Active Travel can be a positive way of increasing the fitness of the older population by ensuring that infrastructure for walking and cycling takes account of the needs of older people, alongside the environmental benefits that this will bring. Public transport can also play a key role to enabling older people to access

opportunities to participate in sport and access leisure centres at convenient times. Sufficient access to public toilets must also be explored to encourage older people to engage more in sport and physical activities in their communities, as poor toilet provision disproportionately affects older people and disabled people.

Tackling Ageist Stereotypes

Even when opportunities to get involved in sport are accessible and available, some older people still feel they are unable to take part. This may be because of long-term illness, disability or simply that they have been made to feel “too old”. These reasons can often be viewed as a barrier for older people to participate, but the responsibility should be placed on the sports themselves to become more accessible and inclusive to ensure that disability and illness are not an automatic barrier to sport and that society’s ageist view of older people’s participation in sport is challenged – **no one should feel too old to participate in sport.**

Case Study 1: Bridgend Super-Agers

The Bridgend Super-Agers project encourages older people to engage in sport and physical activity via a regional partnership approach and aims to produce supportive community activities with older adults, focusing on maintaining independence in communities.

The project enables older people to take part in a variety of sport and physical activity such as Tai Chi and Yoga, both in person and online. The classes provide an inclusive and non-judgemental environment that enables those with limiting conditions or disabilities an avenue to engage in sport and physical activity.

Older people have found improved physical and mental health due to the project, which has translated into improved well-being. Many of the older people taking part in the project have also found the social opportunities that have arisen from the sessions very important.

This narrative shift must be embraced by decision makers in Local Authorities and Welsh Government to provide older people with better access to sport, as well as becoming a responsibility for all of us in society. Older people have previously suffered from policy decisions concerning sport, such as the cuts by Welsh Government to the ‘Free Swimming Initiative’ – a scheme that aimed to increase swimming among the older population. A review in 2018 found that this was not cost-effective, and the scheme was therefore trimmed down. As a result, most eligible older people are now only able to access the scheme at limited times of the day with many opportunities being withdrawn entirely, despite the review highlighting that the programme generated significant initial increases in participation levels which had been sustained for older people⁸. Swimming is an ideal workout for older people due to its low risk of injury and low impact on the body⁹, and so for

those older people who regularly took advantage of the programme, this will have had a big impact.

Such decisions indicate there may be ageist assumptions at a policy making level regarding sport – that the older population can be the first casualty of cost-saving measures because of their perceived lack of interest or ability. This thinking must be turned on its head, so that decision makers understand the positive impact that encouraging older people to take up sport can have for individuals, such as the physical and mental benefits, and the impact this can have on the wider health and social care system.

Making sport more accessible for older people

As well as the need for change at the national level, local partners, including leisure centres, older people’s groups and health providers, must work together to ensure that a collaborative approach to enabling older people to engage in sport is undertaken. Increasing older people’s participation in sport will be crucial if we are to ensure that people are ageing healthily as currently only 21% of those aged over 65 have either four or five healthy lifestyle behaviours¹⁰.

There are many examples already underway of innovative approaches to making existing sports more accessible for older people, with engagement with local and national partners a key element of making these successful and sustainable.

Case Study 2: Walking Rugby

The Commissioner joined members of Cwm Taf University Health Board and the Welsh Rugby Union in 2018 to observe a session of ‘Walking Rugby’ at Pontypridd RFC.

Many of the participants had been socially prescribed Walking Rugby by their GPs as a way of combatting physical and mental health issues. For attendees, this was a way of carrying on playing the sport that they had played when they were younger in a more accessible manner.

Participants highlighted the social aspect of the scheme as important and an opportunity to meet up for men who may have in some cases faced isolation or loneliness.

At the time of the visit, the Welsh Rugby Union was exploring additional opportunities to grow the game of Walking Rugby and the Committee may wish to explore whether these will continue as we start to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Case Study 3: Walking Football

The Commissioner's team has visited many Walking Football schemes underway throughout Wales. These projects, some run by football clubs and others by leisure centres or local sports facilities, provide an inclusive and supportive environment for older people of all abilities to participate.

Whilst many of these groups choose to run just for a bit of fun, others have formed local leagues, and even a Welsh national team – who were even crowned world champions in 2019.

The Football Association of Wales' Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (PAWB) sets out a laudable ambition to make 'Football for everyone, everywhere in Wales' and it is crucial that this includes support for older people to participate in accessible formats of the game.

Case Study 4: Cardiff Pedal Power

Cardiff Pedal Power is a charity that enables people of all ages and abilities to experience the benefits of cycling. They have specially adapted trikes and bikes designed for people with disabilities or impairments and have previously come along to engagement events hosted by the Commissioner to encourage older people to start, or return to, cycling.

The charity understands that although cycling helps older people to improve their physical health and wellbeing, it also provides mental health benefits due to the social nature of cycling.

Work must also be undertaken to enable Wales' unpaid carers to access sport, which will likely help improve their physical and mental health. Many of these carers are older women, with over a third of unpaid carers in Wales being women aged 55+¹¹. Caring for a loved one can be a 24-hour undertaking, leaving little time for the carer's personal wellbeing and health.

Improved respite could help ensure these older carers are able to access opportunities for physical activity, which will help with their physical and mental health, as well as giving them a break from their important commitment.

Opportunities for change

The Welsh Government's Strategy for an Ageing Society provides an opportunity to make a positive step towards achieving a narrative change, as the government has committed to supporting healthy ageing programmes and initiatives, via its Healthy and Active Fund, as well as by supporting Local Authorities to become members of the World Health Organisation's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. This commitment

aligns with the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, a global collaboration that brings people together to improve the lives of older people, as 'Age-Friendly Environments' are an area of action under the programme¹².

As previously mentioned, the accessibility and 'age-friendliness' of a community is an important factor in enabling older people to become more active. The Welsh Government must explore how it can engage with other organisations and work with other government programmes alongside its Strategy to enable more older people to keep fit.

The £14 million Sport and Leisure Recovery Fund mentioned in the Strategy must also give sufficient attention to the needs of the older population, to reverse the physical and mental decline and frailty that has become more prevalent in the last two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Older people have been particularly impacted by the pandemic, with many experiencing a deterioration in their physical and mental health. The Commissioner has already put forward proposals to the Welsh Government to support older people's health and wellbeing by investing in preventative community support. As part of this proposal, the Commissioner recommended that public bodies: should work in partnership to make funding available to voluntary sector organisations to help older people who are suffering from physical and psychological deconditioning to become more physically active and socially engaged; to provide support to people to live as well as they are able while waiting for specialist interventions; and to provide support to maintain quality of life. With rising waiting times for hospital and elective appointments, such rehabilitation work is necessary to help older people who been impacted by Covid-19.

There is a real opportunity ahead for sport to play a key role in rehabilitating older people from the damaging mental and physical effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Committee's Inquiry can be an important step towards addressing the barriers to older people's participation in sport.

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- ¹ NHS. (2022) Benefits of exercise. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/>
- ² National Survey for Wales. (2021) National Survey for Wales: Apr-Jun 21. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>
- ³ Welsh Government. (2021). Relative income poverty: April 2019 to March 2020. Available at: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/householdbelowaverageincome-by-year>
- ⁴ Office for National Statistics, (2021), Health state life expectancies by Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation Quintile (WIMD 2019), Wales, all ages, 22 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/datasets/healthstatelifeexpectanciesbywelshindexofmultipledeprivationquintilewimd2019walesallages>
- ⁵ National Survey for Wales. (2021) National Survey for Wales: Apr-Jun 21. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>
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- ⁷ National Survey for Wales. (2021) National Survey for Wales: Apr-Jun 21. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>
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- ⁹ SeniorLink. (2020) 6 Benefits of Swimming for Older Adults. Available at: <https://www.seniorlink.com/blog/6-benefits-of-swimming-for-seniors>
- ¹⁰ National Survey for Wales. (2021) National Survey for Wales: Apr-Jun 21. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>
- ¹¹ Public Health Wales. (2021) Unpaid carers in Wales: The creation of an e-cohort to understand long-term health conditions amongst unpaid carers in Wales. Available at: <https://phw.nhs.wales/publications/publications1/unpaid-carers-in-wales-the-creation-of-an-e-cohort-to-understand-long-term-health-conditions-amongst-unpaid-carers-in-wales/>
- ¹² World Health Organisation. (2022) Age-friendly Environments. Available at: <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/age-friendly-environments>

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The Commissioner is taking action to end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner wants a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.

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