



Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru

Welsh Government Draft Budget Proposals for 2012-13

Finance Committee call for information

Response from the Older People's Commissioner for Wales

September 2011

Introduction

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales has four general statutory functions:

- (a) to promote awareness of the interests of older people in Wales and of the need to safeguard those interests;
- (b) to promote the provision of opportunities for, and the elimination of discrimination against, older people in Wales;
- (c) to encourage best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales; and
- (d) to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law affecting older people in Wales.¹

The Commissioner is an independent advocate for older people in Wales. This response to the Consultation is in accordance with the Commissioner's general statutory functions. The Commissioner's position is that she will generally make comment relating to core principles. This approach is taken in order to avoid any potential compromise of the Commissioner's regulatory functions. Any practical suggestions made in this document are based on concerns and information brought to the Commissioner by older people.

Section 25 of the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006 states that the Commissioner must have regard to the United Nations

¹ Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006, s.2(1)

Principles for Older Persons adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 16 December 1991. These are cited where relevant.

Questions 1, 3, and 5

- 1) “Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2012-13, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective?”
- 3) “What expectations do you have of the 2012-13 draft budget proposals? What spending commitments and priorities would you like to see in the 2012-13 draft budget proposals?”
- 5) “Can you suggest any elements that should be in the 2012-13 draft budget proposals to support more effective collaborative working?”

I recognise that the Welsh Government has a challenging task to perform in these difficult economic times in allocating a limited budget in the face of increasing demand and competing priorities. However, I am disappointed that there are few specific references to older people in the June 2011 Supplementary Budget Motion. As independent Commissioner I will be seeking opportunities to use my legal powers to ensure older people in Wales do not suffer disproportionately as a consequence of actions taken by Government to meet budgetary pressures.

Older people, and their families and carers, tell me that they are very worried about the potential impact of reductions in public spending, and I share their concerns.

I understand that difficult decisions will need to be made. However, even in the context of immediate financial pressures, I feel it is hugely important to consider the medium and long term effects of cuts to services for older people, particularly in light of the increasing proportion of older people within the population.

As independent Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, I will expect to see at a national, regional and local level:

- Evidence of active consultation and engagement with older people

- A robust evaluation of the impact of any changes to services for older people in Wales

In the past year, the Commission has intervened in some cases to remind decision makers of their responsibilities in this area, and of the devastating impact that a lack of consultation and support can have on vulnerable older people.

I have also discussed ways of monitoring impact with Ministers in the previous Welsh Government. I am not yet satisfied that suitably detailed monitoring is in place. I will continue to press for this with the new government. It is vital that we do everything we can to ensure that ground is not lost and that progress on the older people's agenda is maintained.

There is a particular need in times of economic difficulty to address extremes of poverty and protect people in situations where they are vulnerable. This consideration will be key in the use of my independent position and statutory powers.

I am particularly concerned that pensioner poverty is not being tackled in the same way as child poverty. The causes of poverty are complex and dynamic, so a joined-up "life course" approach to poverty which looks at whole families and communities will benefit all age groups.

Case Study: Day Centres

A number of older people have contact the Commission to voice concerns about local authority proposals to reconfigure or cut day centre services. A common theme in these enquiries is the lack of thorough and transparent consultation. Direct timely engagement and clear communication are vital elements in any consultation process.

I recognise that budgetary constraints are placing increasing pressure on local authorities to make difficult decisions, but the needs and best interests of the older people who use day centre services must be at the heart of any decision-making process. Local authorities should recognise the importance of these services, understanding that companionship and support networks are important for people of all ages, especially older people. Support in this area can reduce demand

on other services, as most problems older people face are made worse when they are left isolated.

Question 4 – ‘Turning the Page’

- 4) “What if any outcomes do you believe the Welsh Government should be trying to achieve with its 2012-13 draft budget?”

Earlier this year the Commission published ‘Turning the Page’ a document outlining ten clear calls for action to improve the lives of older people within this Assembly term.

This document was circulated to all Assembly Members, and I draw the committee’s attention to the enclosed copy by way of answer to this question.

I would like to draw particular attention to this section.

“I recognise the significant and positive work which has been carried out in Wales, including the Strategy for Older People, and the efforts to protect services for those in situations of greatest vulnerability. We do however need to move much faster and further so that older people themselves consistently experience practical improvements. Wales is facing a reduction in budget, and potential cuts to some public services. I believe that by thinking and acting smartly, we can reduce the impact of these changes, and ensure that older people do not suffer disproportionately.

Older people in Wales go into the term of the next Assembly already experiencing greater levels of poverty and deprivation than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. Many of them are worried that this may now get worse. Reports published in 2010² show that large numbers of older people are concerned about debt, or are finding themselves in poverty for the first time when they retire.

We will better make progress in reducing the poverty of many older people once we all recognise the scale of the problem. The

² OPCW ‘Citizens Advice evidence on clients aged 60 or over’ and Consumer Focus Wales ‘Financing the Future’

inequality that increasingly characterises the whole of our economy and society is more than replicated among older people.

In striving to protect front line NHS services, we should not neglect the savings that can be made from the simple interventions to keep people healthy and able to look after themselves in their own homes. Nor must we weaken our resolve to ensure older people are treated with dignity and respect when receiving care at home or at hospital.

In dealing with difficult financial times, it is important that we recognise those policies like the concessionary bus pass which have made smart strategic use of public money. Research undertaken by the Commission has demonstrated that the pass does not just benefit older people, but all bus users and the wider economy.”

Question 2 Older People’s Commissioner for Wales budget

- 2) “Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2012-13, do you have any concerns about specific areas?”

With regard to Question 2, I would like to make some comments regarding the Commission’s own indicative budget allocation for 2012-13 and future years, with reference to the outcomes we are working to achieve.

I have submitted an Estimate to Welsh Ministers, as required by the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006, which sets out the resources required to discharge the functions of my office.

The Commission has reviewed all areas of planned expenditure for 2012-13 and 2013-14 in respect of the services the Commission provides directly for older people in Wales. The Estimate will meet the budgetary expectations of the Welsh Government and live within the indicative funding level of £1.747million.

Whilst this is a reduction of 3% from 2010-11 funding levels the indicative budget recognises the essential role the Commission has to play in listening to older people in Wales and sends a clear message

that their views and experiences remain a priority for the Welsh Government. The establishment of an Older People's Commissioner by the Welsh Government was a world first and a move which is now being considered by other countries around the world, and in the case of Northern Ireland already being followed.

I have taken on board the guidance issued by the Director General for Health and Social Care in 2010-11 to all organisations within that Directorate. The actions I have taken aim to avoid duplication and ensure that the most efficient and effective controls are in place to manage financial expenditure.

Having, like most publically funded organisations, an indicative budget for 2012-13 only means that funding for future years remains uncertain. This restricts the Commission in being able to plan as effectively as possible from one year to another, and ensure that our planned activities can be sustained. These activities include following up recommendations made in prior years, such as in the widely supported 'Dignified Care?' review of older people's experiences in hospital.

I recognise that the Welsh Government needs to retain some flexibility to manage changing priorities and deal with the unexpected. However, I would encourage the Welsh Government to provide more surety of funding for the Comprehensive Spending Review period. This would enable the Commission to enhance our strategic planning and make the most effective use of our resources.


The Commission's 2010-2013 Strategic Plan sets out the key objectives for the Commission to:

- Promote an awareness of the interests of older people in Wales.
- Promote the provision of opportunities for, and elimination of discrimination against older people in Wales.
- Encourage best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales.
- Keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of the law affecting the interests of older people in Wales.

The Commission will be measuring achievement of these objectives through the following outcomes:

- Greater awareness of older people's interests.
- Reduced age discrimination.
- Maintenance of availability of and increased recognition of services which work well for older people.
- More effective law to protect older people.
- A demonstrably dynamic, effective and efficient organisation making a lasting difference.

I will demonstrate how the Commission has utilised its funding by reporting on progress against these objectives in my Annual Report. I welcome the opportunity in this new Assembly term to discuss the Annual Report publicly with the Health and Social Care Committee, in addition to a plenary debate.



Ruth Marks
Older People's Commissioner for Wales