

Enterprise and Business Committee

Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from Age Cymru



Introduction

Age Cymru is the leading charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

We are submitting this evidence to the Committee's inquiry on the regeneration of town centres in recognition of the importance of town centres and communities to older people, and to their specific needs of some older people in accessing them. Older people are significant users of town centres and public services but can often face difficulties accessing public spaces and business premises due to shortcomings in design or a lack of provision of basic amenities.

We have provided information on some of the key issues faced by older people in Wales when using town centres, based on the evidence we received from the Community Calculator tool which formed part of our recent Towards Common ground campaign on age-friendly communities. A full report of the results is available on our website:
<http://www.agecymru.org.uk/get-involved/make-a-donation3/the-community-calculator-results/>

Our evidence relates to the third item in the inquiry terms of reference:

- **How are the interests and activities of communities...identified and coordinated when developing and implementing town centre regeneration projects?**

The economic importance of older people

Ensuring that town centres and communities are accessible to older people is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are specific equality provisions in the Equality Act 2010 which require public authorities and some private service providers to offer older people the same opportunities and ability to access services as anyone else.

Secondly, there is also an increasingly important economic case for doing so. The older consumer market is large and forecast to continue growing. Analysis by the Personal Finance Research Centre at Bristol University finds that the 65-plus age group now accounts for 20 per cent of the UK consumer population and is expected to be 25 per cent by 2030. In fact the market of older consumers is forecast to grow by 81 per cent between 2005 and

2030.¹

Despite these trends, which have been identified for many years, many business and retail centres still fail to adequately consider the requirements of older people and respond to the opportunities and challenges of an ageing society. A 2005 report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs identified a 'generalised failure by industry and commerce to take advantage of the lucrative market represented by the ever-growing group of older people who have at their disposal what is sometimes called the Grey Pound.'²

We believe that failing to consider the requirements of older people and presenting barriers to full access and participation represents a significant economic failure on behalf of those regenerating and developing town centres and other retail environments.

Consulting on the regeneration of town centres

It is important that older people are consulted with and listened to during the development and implementation of any regeneration scheme and that all plans are age-proofed.³ Planning decisions should be considered with express reference to the impact they will have upon all groups using and accessing the town centre and community areas. Involving older people in decisions which will have an impact on them, and ensuring that people's requirements and opinions are taken into account, will help to ensure that communities, services and the built environment are designed in such a way as to make them age-friendly and accessible to all.

The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2008-2013 recognises the importance of engagement, participation and empowerment of older people. It commits the Welsh Government and its partners to maintaining and developing engagement and involvement with older people, including on issues such as planning and provision of services in local communities across Wales. The Strategy also recognises that 'Social isolation is exacerbated...when there are inadequate local facilities such as shops and post offices, and poor transport provision.'⁴

The Equality Act 2010 introduces a duty for public authorities to promote age equality and also includes provisions to make discrimination on the grounds of age unlawful in the provision of goods, facilities and services. The Act is both a driver for, and a tool to assist in, the age-proofing of regeneration plans by local authorities and other public bodies involved. It should also be used to assess current policies, practices and plans in order to improve community access for people of all ages.

¹ Patrick Dixon (2008) 'Marketing to Older Consumers', interview for Marketeer, October 2008. Available at: www.globalchange.com/marketing-to-older-consumers.htm (accessed 08 September 2011).

² House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs (2005), 'Aspects of the Economics of an Ageing Population'

³ See <http://www.agecymru.org.uk/professional-resources/growing-older-in-wales/>

⁴ Welsh Assembly Government (2008), 'The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2008-2013: Living Longer, Living Better' p.6

Accessibility of the built environment

Age-related difficulties faced by many older people, including frailty, reduced mobility or ill-health, mean that disabled access, places to rest, public toilets and parking nearby are vital to ensure that everyone can make use of local services. The physical design of shops and businesses can also present significant physical barriers to older people who wish to access services. These can include poor access arrangements into and out of premises, lack of level access, internal clutter and narrow doorways. Support for local services and businesses when regenerating town centres is vital to ensure that older people are able to use community facilities with the same freedom and confidence as all other users, promoting their ability to lead independent lives.

Age Cymru supports the social model of disability which identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society as the major contributing factor in disabling people, rather than medical conditions. As such the design of communities and the built environment must enable rather than disable members of the community and support people to have equal access to services and facilities. The Strategy for Older People in Wales recognises this and states that 'The needs of older people have to be taken into account as the planning process shapes land use and the built environment. Neighbourhood regeneration...can have a profound influence on health and well being.'⁵

Making town centres safe

Safe, secure and clean streets are important to people of all ages. Good lighting, well maintained and clean streets, and a police presence should all be prioritised, to help people feel more confident about getting out and about. Fear of crime can contribute to social isolation and research has found that 47 per cent of people over 75 years of age do not take part in social or community activities after dark because of fear of crime or anti-social behaviour.⁶

Age Cymru's Community Calculator showed that older people hold strong feelings about litter, dog fouling and cluttered pavements. Refuse and unnecessary street furniture can present trip hazards on pavements and, when considering regeneration plans, it is essential that pavements are sufficiently wide and that refuse collections are able to take place without causing obstructions on pavements.

Public seating

Without adequate seating and places to rest, accessing town centres can be a challenge for many people. Public seating is an essential feature of any age-friendly community, but evidence from the Community Calculator suggests that there is a lack of good quality public seating in many areas throughout Wales. Communities as a whole and individual older people stand to benefit from improved public seating provision, and local authorities should take this into consideration when regenerating community spaces.

⁵ Ibid. p21

⁶ Age Concern England (2003), 'The fear factor: older people and fear of street crime'

Age Cymru is also calling for local authorities and bus operators to ensure that bus stops are equipped with suitable seating wherever possible. Many older people who responded to the Community Calculator specifically identified the absence of seating at bus stations, bus stops and other transport terminals as an issue for them. This risks excluding people from using public transport. If services are delayed then the provision of seating becomes even more important for people who cannot stand for long periods of time without experiencing pain or jeopardising their safety.

Providing adequate seating and places to rest would be of benefit to local businesses and services as it would enable people, and not only older people, to go into town centres, use services and businesses and contribute to the local economy.

Public toilets

Clean, safe and accessible public toilets should also be available at public places so that people are not prevented from leaving their homes and participating in community life. People are more likely to develop continence issues as they get older, including needing to use the toilet more often and with greater urgency. As a result many people become increasingly dependent on public toilets as they age. Adequate provision is vital to enable older people to maintain their dignity and a lack of provision can reduce people's ability to remain active and restrict how often, and for how long, they are able to leave their homes.

We believe that a statutory duty should be placed on local authorities to provide toilets where people need them and to ensure that older people across Wales are able to manage any increased dependency on public toilets with dignity. This should cover transport terminals, shopping centres and parks as well as public buildings. Disabled access toilets should also be provided in all civic areas, to ensure that local authorities meet their statutory duty to ensure disabled people are able to use those areas with the same confidence and freedom as all other users.

Public transport

Half of all households without a car consist of individuals aged over the age of 60⁷ and 66 per cent of single pensioners do not have a car.⁸ Among households across all age groups without a car, around 40 per cent feel that their local bus service fails to meet their travelling needs to the local town centre or shops, while 65 per cent believe it is inadequate for travel to their local hospital.⁹

A lack of appropriate provision and problems with accessibility mean that many people struggle to access safe, frequent and reliable public transport. Community transport can play a crucial role in helping people to access essential services by providing services where public transport cannot or does not, and on a door-to-door basis for people with specific mobility needs. These services provide an essential lifeline for many older people and we would like to see increased provision across the whole of Wales. Good practice models of

⁷ Welsh Assembly Government (2007), 'Living Longer Living Better: report of an advisory group on the Strategy for Older People in Wales'

⁸ The Poverty Site, Wales. 'Services section, Access to transport.' April 2009

⁹ Welsh Assembly Government/Office for National Statistics (2009), 'A Statistical Focus on Age in Wales'

community transport provision should be replicated and strongly supported by the public sector to ensure their sustainability.

Age Cymru believes that further options should be explored for extending the concessionary scheme to cover community transport on a national basis, as this becomes affordable, in order to improve the transport opportunities for older people who are unable to access bus services.

Conclusion

We hope that these comments will prove useful to the Enterprise and Business Committee. We would be more than happy to provide any further information as required.