

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the provision of affordable housing in Wales

Response from Age Cymru



November 2011

Introduction

Age Cymru is the leading national 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 pleased to provide our views on the terms of reference for the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Inquiry into the provision of affordable housing.

Comments

We welcome this Inquiry and feel the suggested terms of reference have the capacity to adequately address many of the generic housing needs of older people in Wales. The review of the current subsidy arrangements with a view to identifying innovative new approaches offers an opportunity to improve the position of older people in respect of access to affordable housing. In particular, we are supportive of any moves to promote cross sector collaborative working as this again will result in the best possible housing outcomes for older people. However, we would like to highlight the following specific older peoples housing policy issues for consideration by the Committee and hope that they will be of assistance and inform the Inquiry.

Suitable housing is a fundamental pillar of a successful community. Older people must be able to live safe, independent and active lives in the setting most appropriate to them. In Wales, 73 per cent of all households with someone aged over 60 are home owners and 16 per cent live in local authority or housing association owned properties. Around 11 per cent of all older households are in the private rented sector.¹

¹ A Statistical Focus on Older People in Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, 2008.

The Welsh Government has indicated that it has three key priorities as part of its strategic direction on housing:

1. Quality of housing, including in the private rented sector.
2. Affordability, including dealing with rising costs with a particular emphasis on the impact of benefit reform.
3. Supply – covering both the issues of finance and land use.

We welcome these priorities as they address many of the housing related policy and service issues that affect older people. However, we also want to see all new homes in Wales built to Lifetime Home standards, making them suitable to people of all ages. This would meet the previous Welsh Government commitment in the 2001 Wales Housing Strategy, Better Homes for People in Wales and ensure that all new housing built by registered social landlords met the Lifetime Homes standards. We would like to see this commitment extended to all new housing in Wales.

Even if this commitment was achieved there would still be a need to address the difficult problem of upgrading our current housing stock. Sub-standard housing is a particular issue in Wales, as revealed by a review of research literature by Bangor University in 2000 which found that Welsh housing stock may be the worst in Western Europe. Poor housing has a considerable impact on the health, social and psychological well-being of older people. One of the main focuses of the Welsh Government's agenda in relation to both housing and social care is that people should be supported to stay in their homes for as long as possible. However, currently people are required to wait long periods to receive adaptations that will make their homes safe and support them to remain independent. Delays persist despite the increased investment that has been made in this area, for example, through the Strategy for Older People in Wales. This was demonstrated by an inquiry carried out by the National Assembly for Wales' Equality of Opportunity Committee in 2009. Leadership from the Welsh Government, with clear performance targets for reasonable adaptations, could ensure that regional variations and unacceptable delays are minimised.

It is important that older people have access to a range of good-quality housing options which meet their needs as they get older. Specialist housing, including sheltered accommodation and extra-care housing, can offer basic support for many people allowing them to live independently for longer within a safe and secure environment. Recent controversy over removal of onsite wardens and the reconfiguration of support services has highlighted pressures on traditional sheltered housing and the next few years will be important in determining their future role. Specialist housing is often cost-effective over the long-term because it reduces demand on residential care homes and hospitals, and can provide community living and associated benefits to quality of life. The presence of a warden is often a key factor in reducing demand on the emergency services and hospitals.

Some older people may have distinct needs in relation to housing provision. A report by the Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Network highlighted specific needs in relation to housing provision and recommend that awareness training should be undertaken by all housing service providers to raise awareness of the housing needs of LGBT people in Wales. Minority ethnic and refugee older people can also face particular housing issues, however to date provision of appropriate housing options for this group has been extremely

limited. Minority ethnic older people often have less equity in their homes, are less likely to be home-owners in the first place and more likely to be living on a low income than other groups.

Key Calls:

- The proposed Welsh Housing Act, expected to be introduced in 2013, should address the needs of older people. To fully exploit this opportunity it will be vital to engage older people in the development of an integrated older peoples housing strategy for Wales. This will need to be cognisant of both the existing older people's policy framework and other closely aligned cross cutting issues such as fuel poverty.
- We have concerns regarding the accuracy of homelessness data in relation to older people and believe the current system of collecting information on individuals experiencing or in danger of becoming homeless should be reviewed. It is essential that the true numbers of older people affected by homelessness are readily available. We would like the research recently approved by the Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage to explore this matter with a view to informing the review of homelessness legislation in Wales as outlined in the Welsh Government's commitment in the Ten Year Homelessness Plan 2009-2019. The findings of this research will contribute to the White Paper due to be published in the spring of 2012 which must include a recommendation that local authorities record accurate data on the numbers of older people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.
- There are inconsistencies in the systems and structures in place for the provision of home adaptations and the setting of service charges in supported housing complexes. Removal of warden services and combined with the impact of the proposed benefit reforms may have a disproportionate effect upon older people and we would call for these matters to be central features of a specific Older People's Housing Strategy for Wales.

Conclusion

We hope these comments are useful to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee and we would be more than happy to provide further information as required. We look forward to contributing to the Inquiry in the future.