

Petitions Committee, National Assembly for Wales

Re: Anglesey Cluster Support for Lôn Las Môn

Our population is ageing, the number of over 85s will double in the next ten years.

Care needs will increase and this will place pressure on both health and social care services. We will need to focus on improving self-care, functioning and independence in our ageing population.

One of the most crucial areas in maintaining independence is maintaining good mobility and physical function. Simply leaving the house everyday has been shown to improve and maintain independence and health as we age.

Obesity is increasing, as are the associated problems such as arthritis and joint pain. Individuals with joint pain mobilise less, become increasingly weak and are much more likely to lose independence and become reliant on care services. It is extremely difficult to regain physical function when lost.

We need to emphasise that one of the most important treatments for arthritis is increasing physical activity to improve muscle strength and support around arthritic joints.

The phrase “wear and tear of the joint” is damaging. This reinforces the perception that activity contributes to worsening arthritis when in fact the opposite is true.

Many individuals believe that their joint pains are the cause of their obesity and sedentary lifestyle, but the truth is that it is the sedentary lifestyle and obesity that worsens their arthritis and joint pains.

Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle are huge risk factors for loss of function as we age, with subsequent loss of independence, large demands on care services and loss of quality of life.

We need to change attitudes and understandings and we need to change the commonly accepted view that ageing inevitable means becoming less active and more obese.

We must focus on increased physical activity throughout life but given the current situation and the near future demands we need to focus on the population most at risk, which we believe are the sedentary and obese individuals over fifty years old. This is the population that is likely to place the highest burden on our care services in the next few decades.

Individuals who have stopped being active can find it very difficult and intimidating to start exercising again. Starting at a Gym or trying to become involved in sports team is difficult at any age and can be seen as impossible for individuals who haven't carried out strenuous exercise for years.

We have some schemes based in our Leisure Centres focussing on our older population and we have Social Prescribing schemes to try and encourage and promote exercise but it is essential that we have a wide range of resources that will attract this particular group of patients.

The Lon Las route is an attractive route with good accessibility and good links throughout the Island. It would be a versatile resource, allowing walking, running, cycling and horse riding.

Whilst it is clearly possible to walk and exercise in many different settings the Lon Las route is flat and avoids road traffic. It would feel safe and achievable to individuals with health problems or poor fitness who might be intimidated by walking or exercising in areas with heavy traffic, hilly routes or traditional footpaths over difficult terrain.

Our hope is that the route becomes a good starting point for individuals of all levels of ability and would help to improve fitness and confidence, and inspire people to increase their level of exercise.

Skills "like riding a bike" can be retained for life, but the confidence to cycle on our roads is easily lost. Cycling is increasing in popularity and having this type of facility that allows individuals to return to cycling in a safe and accessible format would be hugely beneficial. It seems possible that we could utilise the growing popularity of e-bikes along with very usable paths to allow for gentle reintroduction to cycling.

A large proportion of health and social care demands are related to mental health difficulties. There is an increasing realisation that mild mental health difficulties are often related to social and community problems and that focussing on addressing these can be more useful to promoting good mental health than a medicalised model involving medication and formal therapy.

Increased physical activity, particularly activities outdoor and activities as part of a group are hugely beneficial to mental health.

Encouraging individuals to start exercising or undertake outdoor activities can be difficult and having easy access to attractive resources such as Lon Las for any level of ability to increase their physical activity would be hugely beneficial, particularly if motivation levels and confidence are low.

We know that many mental health issues are social in their nature and we believe that building more resilient communities can protect individuals and communities. We believe that this can reduce mental health problems and reduce demand on all areas of health, social care and local authority.

We want to focus on schemes that are developed by local communities themselves. Simply introducing projects devised by external agents rarely attract the community support, enthusiasm and involvement needed to be self-perpetuating and self-managing. These tend to rely on ongoing funding and risk failing when this is stopped.

One of the strengths of this scheme is the level of local support and enthusiasm and the numbers of people and groups who have expressed interest and a willingness to support and take part.

We appreciate that there is a hope that a reintroduced railway would attract tourists to the area but it seems very unlikely that a heritage tourist attraction could ever offer the same community amenity that would add value and improve the health and quality of life of the Islands residents. In any case we believe that Lôn Las Môn would be a more attractive tourism draw in its own right.

The suggestion that this line could be a meaningful commuter infrastructure link seems flawed. A service of this type seems unlikely to be able to offer frequent service and we believe that there is a higher likelihood of commuting cyclists in greater number than the numbers of individuals able to rely on what would have to be very limited number of journeys a day. It seems unhelpful to be considering the massive investment needed for commuting of this type when we should be arguing for increased bus services through the variety of isolated communities across the Island.

As practices across Anglesey we have discussed the Lôn Las proposal in our cluster meetings. Besides from the likely economic benefits we feel this is a project that aligns extremely well with our cluster goals and would be hugely beneficial to the physical and mental health of our population.

We are strongly supportive of this project and do not believe that trying to return this line to rail use offers the same potential of community, economic and health benefits that could be achieved.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Dyfrig ap Dafydd
Cluster Lead for Anglesey Cluster