

## Consultation Response

### Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee

February 2011

#### 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 pleased to respond to the Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee's request for issues to be examined by the succeeding committee in the fourth assembly.

We would like to propose the following issues for future Committee inquiries: Age discrimination in health services (this includes screening services and mental health), and the provision of public toilets in Wales.

#### Age discrimination in health services

The Equality Act 2010 targets age discrimination in the provision of public services, including health and social care, and the provisions must be implemented in Wales to remove unwarranted age barriers in diagnosis and treatment within the NHS. We believe that discriminatory policies and practices still exist in areas of the NHS including in screening and mental health services:

##### ➤ Screening services

Ageing is the biggest risk factor for breast cancer and according to Cancer Research UK, 81 per cent of breast cancers are diagnosed in women aged 50 and over. Despite this, women aged over 70 years are not automatically called for breast cancer screening. Although these women can still request screenings, having a cut off point for invitations to screening at 70 wrongly suggests that the risk diminishes at that point. A survey of women over 50 by Breakthrough Breast Cancer found that only 2 percent thought that women over 70 were most at risk<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Cancer Research UK found 77 percent of women thought the risk was higher for those under 70<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> ICM Poll commissioned by Breakthrough Breast Cancer

<sup>2</sup> Cancer Research UK Survey of 2,289 women, 2006

For women over 70 years, the lack of awareness of the risk is exacerbated by a lack of awareness of the entitlement and the need to self-refer. The policy places the impetus on older women, and the Breakthrough Survey found that 90 percent in the over 70 group had not requested a test.

### ➤ **Mental health services**

Within our current system, mental health services are often different for 'adults of working age' and 'older people' (65 and over). Older patients are sometimes transferred from successful treatments when they reach 65 to dementia services and are often not offered the full range of treatments available to address their conditions. Older people should be treated on the basis of need rather than age and given equal access to treatment such as counselling and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy as well as equal choice and quality of treatment.

According to the final report from the UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-Being in Later Life – a major independent inquiry supported by Age Concern - over 3.5 million older people in the UK who experience mental health problems do not have satisfactory services and support. The report found that older people's mental health issues remain poorly understood, highly stigmatised and are not given the required priority in policy, practice and research. It demonstrated a "tremendous unmet need in every area" and argued that "age discrimination remains the fundamental problem", meaning that "the majority of older people with mental health services do not receive services<sup>3</sup>."

A statutory requirement to adopt 'age proofing' would facilitate an audit of the use of arbitrary age limits in health and care provision. This would provide an accurate picture of the extent and effect of issues such as the removal of people over 65 with mental health needs from the care of mental health teams, who have often developed a thorough understanding of the person and their condition and their placement within the service remit of a geriatric team.

We believe that a thorough investigation into the use of arbitrary age distinctions within health and care services would be an extremely valuable exercise for the Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee to undertake in the next Assembly.

### **Public Toilets**

The number of public toilets in Wales has steeply declined in recent years, and significant numbers are at risk of permanent closure. There is a lack of recent data available about the exact numbers of public toilets in Wales; however the British Toilet Association has estimated that the UK's public toilets have declined by in excess of 40% in the past decade. Local authorities face difficult challenges when managing upcoming budget cuts and we are concerned that this will lead to further closures of public toilets unless direct action is taken.

Public toilets play a vital role in ensuring that communities are accessible to people of all ages. As people age, they are more likely to develop continence issues, including needing to

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<sup>3</sup> Improving services and support for older people with mental health problems: UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-Being into Later Life, 2007.

use the toilet more often and with greater urgency. In the UK, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 7 men over 65 experience incontinence.<sup>4</sup>

Public toilets are an essential part of our communities, and adequate provision is vital to enable people to retain their dignity and the confidence to participate in community life. Poor public toilet provision has a significant impact upon older people as it reduces their ability to remain active and restricts how often, and for how long, they are able to leave their homes. Age Cymru's recent Community Calculator™ questionnaire found that older people in Wales rated their access to public toilets in their communities as just 3.32 out of 10.

In 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government launched a public facilities scheme, to encourage businesses to open their facilities to the public. Sign-up to the scheme varies significantly across Wales and generally, successes have been muted to date. This scheme has not delivered the substantial improvement to public toilet provision required; however we believe that this mechanism can be part of a sustainable solution to toilet provision. This scheme can also potentially address concerns about safety and vandalism of public toilets, as business premises will be staffed. A statutory duty alongside such schemes will ensure that local authorities provide these essential facilities, and encourage them to consider innovative, cost-effective means of provision that meet the needs of their communities.

Age Cymru is calling for the Welsh Assembly Government to impose a statutory duty on local authorities in Wales to provide public toilets that are clean, open, safe and accessible, to support older people to access their communities.

We believe that the provision of public toilets, or possibly a wider inquiry into the degree to which communities in Wales promote equal access and opportunities for older people, would be another valuable area for the Committee's consideration.

## **Conclusion**

We hope that these comments will prove useful to the Committee. We would be more than happy to provide any further information or to discuss possible terms of reference for any potential areas and their impact on older people, as required.

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<sup>4</sup> Systematic Review and Evaluation of Methods of Assessing Urinary Incontinence, Health Technology Assessment (2006) Martin et al.