

The ageing population in Wales

Jonathan Baxter and Stephen Boyce

Is Wales equipped to provide its older people with the care and housing services they need?

Wales has an ageing population. In 2008, 18 per cent of the population was over 65; by 2033 this is expected to rise to almost 26 per cent. As in much of the developed world, increased wealth, health and standards of living mean that its citizens can now enjoy a far longer retirement than that of even relatively recent generations.

Successive Welsh Governments have taken a progressive and inclusive approach to ageing policy since devolution. The appointment of an Older People's Commissioner in 2008 was the first such post in the UK. That appointment coincided with the second phase of the Welsh Government's Older People's Strategy, which focuses on mainstreaming older people's

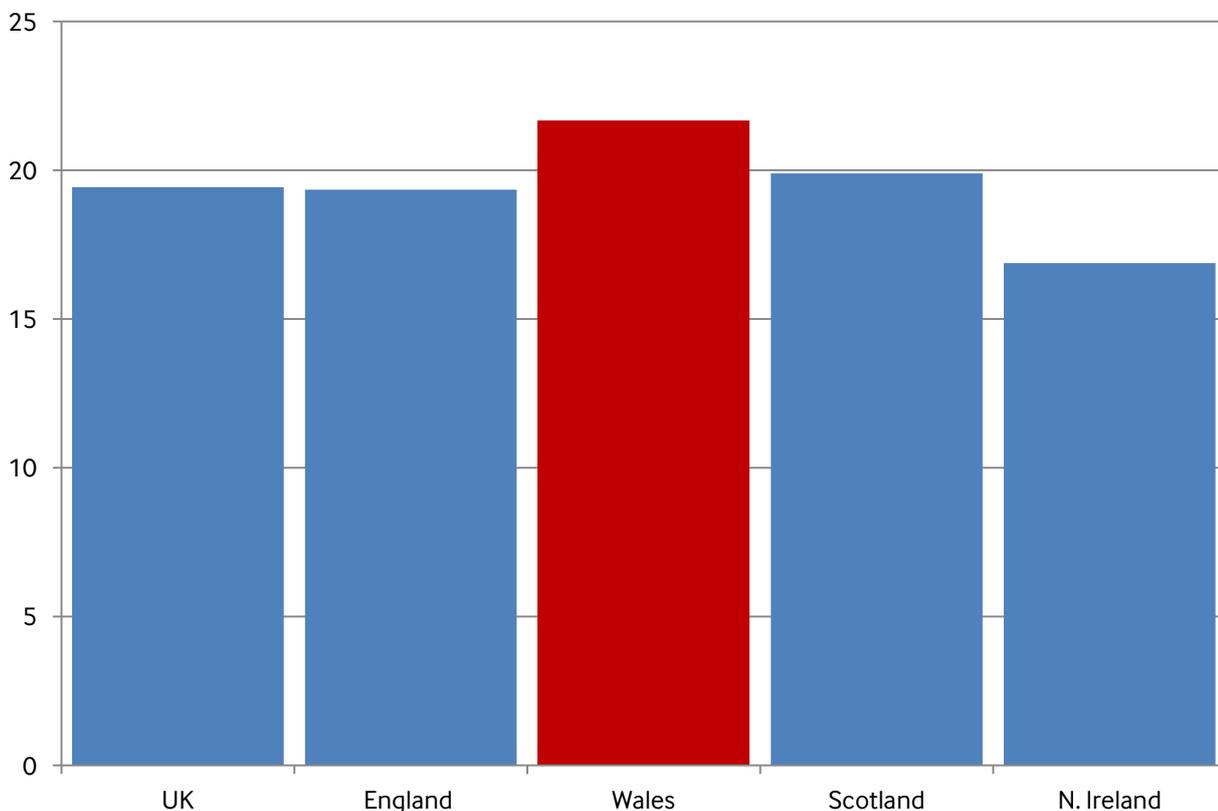
concerns across all policy areas, and was followed a year later by the UK's first wellbeing monitor for older people.

A home for life

In common with other developed economies, successive Welsh Governments have followed a policy of enabling older people to maintain their independence and stay in their own home for as long as possible, known as 'Ageing in Place', but is this policy sustainable as the population ages?

Adaptation and maintenance initiatives can all bring wider benefits to individuals, and even medium to long term savings to the public purse through lower health and social care costs, but

Percentage of population over retirement age



Source: ONS

whether increased demand in the coming years will make them affordable in the face of public spending cuts remains to be seen.

Some alternatives to increased public expenditure have been developed, including a move from grants to loans, and enabling the eight out of ten older people who own their own home to access finance for maintenance through equity release schemes. The provision of support, adaptations and repairs has allowed many older people to stay in their own homes. However, changes to support arrangements in sheltered housing have angered some tenants. Many resident warden services have been replaced by floating support. Wider use is also being made of modern technology to assist with care provision through Telecare services, meaning a carer does not always have to be physically present. This has left some older people feeling isolated, but does allow support to be provided to residents regardless of whether they are living in a designated sheltered housing complex.

Social care

As more people than ever need help with day to day living the pressure on social services is increasing and local authorities, the gatekeepers

of public provision, are raising eligibility thresholds to manage demand.

Local authorities have long been able to charge for care services. While the rules for residential care charges apply across Wales, charges for home care services vary, with each local authority setting its own levels. The result for older people has been, at best, confusion and at worst resentment at having to pay for care, sometimes by selling the family home.

A Welsh approach

Although Scotland has abolished charges for personal care for older people, Wales has balked at the potential cost of such a scheme and has instead sought to limit the financial burden on individuals receiving care at home. In the longer term, however, agreement is needed on how the burden of paying for care is to be shared between individuals and the state. A Welsh Government Green Paper in 2009 outlined some options but the final outcome is partly dependent on reforms in England. For example, the new UK Government has made pension and welfare reform central to its programme for government and this will all influence policy development in Wales.

Most care is provided informally by relatives or

Making 'Ageing in Place' a reality

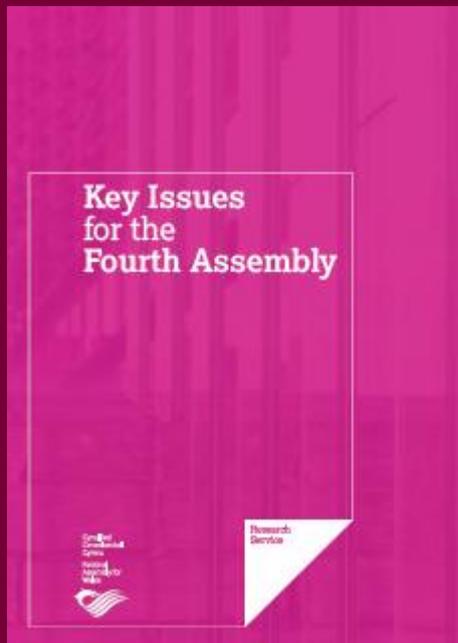
Substantial public funding has supported policies intended to allow older people to continue living in their own home:

- all new publicly funded social housing has to meet the Lifetime Homes standard, ensuring it can be more easily adapted;
- Care and Repair agencies provide advice and practical assistance to older people, and also manage the Rapid Response Adaptations programme;
- Extra Care housing provides independent living for people with higher support needs;
- Physical Adaptation Grants for housing association tenants and Disabled Facilities Grants for people across tenures provide funding for adaptations; and
- housing related support is funded through the Supporting People programme.

friends. The independent sector is the largest supplier of formal care services with many older people arranging their care with individual providers. Local authorities have tended to focus on assessment and care management, commissioning services for those who do not arrange their care privately. The previous Welsh Government has set out plans to improve the consistency of services across Wales and to introduce regional commissioning which should help to make better use of limited resources. Nevertheless, the increasing pressure on local authority budgets will be keenly felt by independent providers as they are asked to do more for less.

Moves towards the personalisation of services in England have been taken up more slowly in Wales where there is some scepticism about 'consumerist' approaches to care. However, expectations around the quality and flexibility of services will rise as the post-war baby boomer generation reaches old age. With the increase in dementia, the need for specialist services at the interface of health and social care is growing. Add to this a period of considerable pressure on public service expenditure and social care could finally emerge from the shadow of the NHS as an issue of national importance.

Article taken from Research Service publication



Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

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Research Service
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Email: **Research.Service@wales.gov.uk**

Twitter: **[@NAWResearch](https://twitter.com/NAWResearch)**