

Public Policy Statement

Health interventions and preventative services

May 2018

Summary

Staying well, feeling good and remaining as independent as possible are of vital importance to everyone in Wales. All older people should be supported to make informed choices about maintaining and improving their health and independence. Opportunities for healthy living should be increased and barriers removed, particularly for disadvantaged older people. Public health messages must be reviewed to ensure that they target older audiences in the most appropriate way and through the most relevant channels.

The Welsh Government must ensure that people across Wales have equitable access to the 'Add to your Life' checks and that they receive appropriate information and signposting. Uptake of health checks and screening programmes by different groups must be monitored and action should be taken to increase the reach of those that under-use the services, including those above the age for routine invitation. We believe there should be a review of all arbitrary age limits for health screenings and, in particular, the upper age limit for automatic invitation to breast cancer screening should be removed.

In Wales the percentage of adults who reported their health very good or good declined with age (63% of adults aged 65-74; 51% of adults aged 75+). Adults reporting being in bad or very bad health increased with age (11% of adults aged 65-74; 14% of adults aged 75+). The proportion of adults reporting at least one illness or disability increased with age.¹

In Wales, people are living longer and spending longer in good health, but the number of years spent living with poor health is also increasing.² Public Health

¹ Welsh Government (2017) National Survey for Wales 2016-17: Illnesses. Statistical bulletin 20 Sept 2017 SB 47/2017. <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2017/170920-national-survey-2016-17-illnesses-en.pdf>

² Public Health Wales Observatory (2018) Health and its determinants in Wales. [http://www2.nphs.wales.nhs.uk:8080/PubHObservatoryProjDocs.nsf/85c50756737f79ac80256f2700534ea3/93cea84901926a258025820b0059c112/\\$FILE/Health&determinantsinWales_Summary_Eng.pdf](http://www2.nphs.wales.nhs.uk:8080/PubHObservatoryProjDocs.nsf/85c50756737f79ac80256f2700534ea3/93cea84901926a258025820b0059c112/$FILE/Health&determinantsinWales_Summary_Eng.pdf)

Wales states that men and women are likely to spend on average 17 and 20 years respectively living in poor health, which will impact on their quality of life and use of services.

Preventative health care services play a key role in promoting the health and wellbeing of older people. Access to services such as optometry, audiology, dentistry, physiotherapy and podiatry are essential. The cost of dental treatment can be a barrier to some older people. In particular, access to foot care services across Wales must be improved; they are vital to keep older people active and independent and to reduce the risk of falls. Action is also required to ensure that older people in residential care have access to the same standards of healthcare services as the wider community.

Early intervention and a reablement approach to supporting people can help to maintain independence at home and delay the need for high-end residential care. The third sector and public must be included in the development of local planning and commissioning strategies to improve appropriate preventative service provision across Wales.

Summary of public policy proposals

- Older people should be able to easily access appropriately tailored information, services and activities to enable them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Local Health Boards must ensure that healthcare professionals, particularly GPs, give advice on healthy ageing, including sexual health, and refer their patients to support as appropriate.
- The Welsh Government should continue to expand the use of community pharmacies to promote public health messages and fully integrate community pharmacies into chronic conditions pathways for conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory conditions.
- Public Health Wales must ensure it has an appropriate focus on older people. This should include ensuring mainstream public health services and campaigns are inclusive, as well as undertaking specific work on public health issues that primarily affect people in later life.
- The Welsh Government must ensure that health promoting strategies for adults include issues relating to later life such as late-onset drinking.
- The Welsh Government must have in place robust monitoring systems for the 'Working Together to Reduce Harm Delivery Plan' to ensure the implementation of a communication strategy which highlights the risks of substance misuse to older people.
- The Welsh Government must have in place robust monitoring systems for the 'Together for Mental Health Strategy' to ensure older people are no longer treated on the basis of their age rather than need in mental health services.

- The Welsh Government should monitor and evaluate the take-up and effectiveness of the 'Add to your Life' check to ensure that the checks are contributing effectively to improving the health of older people.
- Local Health Boards should work with GPs to monitor uptake of health checks and screening programmes by different groups and take action to increase the reach of those that under-use the services, including those above the age for routine invitation.
- The Welsh Government should publicise the objective justification for having upper-age limits on cancer screening. Where they cannot be clinically justified, for example breast cancer screening, age limits should be removed and automatic invitations to screening should continue.
- The Welsh Government must prioritise preventative health care services, and give further direction to local authorities and Local Health Boards to ensure sustainable investment in services.
- Health professionals, including in primary care, must provide access and referral to preventative measures such as regular eye tests, and advise and encourage older people to adopt healthy lifestyles and take up available preventative measures.
- The Welsh Government must improve access to foot care services for all older people in Wales. The fairest way to do this would be with a statutory funded service, providing basic foot care, free at the point of use across Wales.
- The Welsh Government must provide public information on falls prevention for older people, and ensure that all older people who have experienced a fall are able to access a structured 'strength and balance' exercise programme.
- The Welsh Government must provide stronger direction to care homes in Wales to improve access to health and care services for residents, such as regular access to GPs, dentists, opticians and audiologists.
- The views and needs of older people must be reflected in the population needs assessments which should then inform local joint commissioning. This should include adequate commissioning for common conditions, including footcare, dentistry, sensory impairment, incontinence, arthritis and depression.
- The Welsh Government must introduce a statutory duty on local authorities and Local Health Boards to provide integrated reablement services spanning housing, health and social care.
- Local Health Boards, with local authorities, must deliver high quality reablement services in partnership with third sector organisations which include social support as well as physical rehabilitation and home adaptations. These services must be well integrated with any other services that promote independence and wellbeing.

Health interventions and preventative services

This policy statement covers:

- Healthy lifestyles
- Screening and health checks
- Prevention and early intervention.

Note: NHS services and social care are covered in other Age Cymru policy statements.

Public policy proposals

Healthy lifestyles

Healthy eating, being physically active, not smoking and only drinking alcohol in moderation can prevent or delay the onset of serious conditions such as heart disease and, in some cases, dementia.³ In spite of this, health promotion is often disproportionately targeted at younger ages: for example malnutrition, which is common in later life, is overshadowed by obesity (nutrition and hydration are covered in greater detail in the Age Cymru Policy Statement on Social Care.

The National Survey for Wales showed that adults aged 45 to 74 were most likely to be overweight or obese (66-67%). 19 per cent of adults aged 55-64 reported smoking cigarettes, and 7% used e-cigarettes. Twenty-four percent of adults aged 55-64 reported drinking above weekly guidelines. The proportion of adults who reported doing at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise in the previous week was highest among younger adults and decreased with age thereafter; rates of inactivity were highest among older adults.⁴

Physical activity helps to improve both physical and mental health and wellbeing and should be encouraged and facilitated at every opportunity. There is strong evidence that proper investment in health promotion and encouraging healthy and active later years saves considerable money in terms of later health services.

Older people can face a number of barriers that affect their ability to make, or access, healthier lifestyle choices. These can include their financial situation, the cost of gym membership, the availability of transport and hence access to key services, isolation or loneliness and a paucity of relevant information about the most beneficial lifestyle choices or activities that would help to improve their health. The

³ Age UK (2016) Health, wellbeing and prevention (England). Policy Position Paper.

⁴ Welsh Government (2017) National Survey for Wales 2016-17: Population Health – Lifestyle. Statistical Bulletin 29 June 2017 SB 67/2017.

nature of the message and the channels used to communicate healthy lifestyle information must be proactive and age-appropriate.

The Public Health (Wales) Act 2017 aims to improve the planning and delivery of pharmaceutical services, and strengthen the role of community pharmacy in promoting public health.⁵ Community pharmacies can be utilised to deliver health promotion campaigns and lifestyle interventions. Consideration must be given to those rural areas that may lack community pharmacy facilities.

Alcohol abuse can be a problem for people of all ages, but it is more likely to go unrecognised among older people. About a third of people with drinking problems develop them for the first time in later life,⁶ whilst early-onset drinkers may face chronic health conditions as they grow older. A report by Alcohol Concern Cymru⁷ concluded that a number of factors linked to age, such as bereavement or disruption to lifestyle following retirement, can lead to heavier drinking. Furthermore, healthcare professionals do not always recognise when older people's health problems are linked to alcohol, or may not know how to raise the issue, meaning that alcohol-related problems are left untreated. Although alcohol use declines with age, older adults in England and Wales are more likely than younger adults to exceed the recommended drink limits, and older adults consume alcohol at high risk levels. Alcohol-related deaths in older populations are increasing in Wales.⁸

Older adults, as a group, are more likely than earlier generations to develop substance misuse problems. Older adults use large amounts of prescriptions and over-the-counter medication (more than four-fifths of people in Wales aged 65-plus report regularly taking prescribed medicines for a year or more) and unintended dependency or misuse can be a problem; and, while illicit drug misuse is not widespread among older adults, it is an issue for some, and the population in treatment for substance misuse problems is ageing.⁹

The Welsh Government's Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 'Working Together to Reduce Harm Delivery Plan 2016-18' includes a key action to 'Raise awareness of the harms associated with substance misuse in older age' which involves the implementation of a communication strategy which highlights the risks of substance misuse to older people, including tailored messages to people aged 50 and over on 'safe alcohol consumption, use of POM (Prescription Only Medicines), OTCs (Over the Counter Medicines) and other drugs with professionals who come into contact with older people'.¹⁰ There is also the requirement for soft-outcome services, such as

⁵ National Assembly for Wales (2017) Public Health (Wales) Act 2017. Research Briefing. [http://www.assembly.wales/Research%20Documents/Public%20Health%20\(Wales\)%20Act%202017/17-025-Web-English.pdf](http://www.assembly.wales/Research%20Documents/Public%20Health%20(Wales)%20Act%202017/17-025-Web-English.pdf)

⁶ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2012) Alcohol and older people.

⁷ Alcohol Concern Cymru (2011): Hidden harm? Alcohol and older people in Wales.

⁸ Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse (APoSM) (2017) Substance Misuse in an Ageing Population. <http://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/170302ageing-population-reporten.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Welsh Government (2016) Working Together to Reduce Harm. Delivery Plan 2016-18.

befriending and neighbourhood schemes, which can help to support those who may be triggered by adverse life effects and loneliness.

It is essential that we recognise that poor mental health among older people, including cognitive impairment, can have significant implications for our health and social care systems. Older people must 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. We welcome the 'age inclusive' vision of the Welsh Government's 'Together for Mental Health' ten year mental health strategy, which was launched in 2012¹¹ and the intention 'Through the life course, transfers between services must be based on individual clinical need rather than artificial age boundaries'. The Strategy's Delivery Plan 2016-2019 has 10 priority areas, covering mental health provision of people for all ages, and covers a wide range of issues including dementia.¹² The implementation of this Strategy and robust monitoring of outcomes will be crucial to its success. (The impact of loneliness and isolation upon both mental and physical health is covered in greater detail in the Age Cymru Policy Statement on Health Services and the NHS.)

Sexual health

A recent review of the sexual health services in Wales¹³ illustrated that the main focus is on the younger population and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. The Welsh Government, who commissioned the report, highlights the significant contribution sexual health services in Wales make in the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹⁴ A 2012 study reported a rise in STIs among the over-50s.¹⁵ We believe that focus is also needed on engaging with older adults on sexual health services and that Local Health Boards must ensure that healthcare professionals, particularly GPs, give advice on healthy ageing, including sexual health, and refer their patients to support as appropriate.

Public policy proposals

- Older people should be able to easily access appropriately tailored information, services and activities to enable them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Local Health Boards must ensure that healthcare professionals, particularly GPs, give advice on healthy ageing, including sexual health, and refer their patients to support as appropriate

¹¹ Welsh Government (2012) Together for Mental Health. A Strategy for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Wales. <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/121031tmhfinalen.pdf>

¹² National Assembly for Wales (2016) Will "Together for Mental Health" Deliver? Research Briefing.

¹³ Public Health Wales (2018) Sexual Health Review 2017/2018. A Review of Sexual Health in Wales <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/888/A%20Review%20of%20Sexual%20Health%20in%20Wales%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf>

¹⁴ Welsh Government (2018) Health Secretary welcomes review findings into Sexual Health Services in Wales. <https://gov.wales/newsroom/health-and-social-services/2018/sexual-health/?lang=en>

¹⁵ Age UK (2012) Rise in STIs among over-50s. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/archive/rise-in-stis-among-over-50s/>

- The Welsh Government must continue to strengthen the role of community pharmacy in promoting public health messages and fully integrate community pharmacies into chronic conditions pathways for conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory conditions
- Public Health Wales must ensure it has an appropriate focus on older people. This should include ensuring mainstream public health services and campaigns are inclusive, as well as undertaking specific work on public health issues primarily impact people in later life.
- The Welsh Government must ensure that health promoting strategies for adults include issues relating to later life such as late-onset drinking.
- The Welsh Government must have in place robust monitoring systems for the 'Working Together to Reduce Harm Delivery Plan' to ensure the implementation of a communication strategy which highlights the risks of substance misuse to older people.
- The Welsh Government must have in place robust monitoring systems for the 'Together for Mental Health Strategy' to ensure older people are no longer treated on the basis of their age rather than need in mental health services.

Screening and health checks

'Add to your Life'

'Add to your Life'¹⁶ is a free NHS Wales online health and wellbeing self-assessment for people over 50 in Wales. The aim of the health check is to increase health literacy and provide information and signposting to over 50s so that they may have longer years of good health, whilst also encouraging older people to stay active and healthy into the future.

Cancer screening

Detection of ill health or disease before the individual person is aware of symptoms is beneficial in cases where early treatment increases the likelihood of a better outcome. However, screening programmes such as those for breast cancer do not routinely invite people over a certain age. We are concerned that this could create the impression that the risk associated with these conditions reduces with age and that, consequently, people are not independently seeking investigation.¹⁷

Ageing is the biggest risk for breast cancer and according to Cancer Research UK, 81 per cent of breast cancers are diagnosed in women aged 50 and over. One-third of women diagnosed with breast cancer are aged over 70. However, there is low awareness of this and in a survey conducted by Public Health England less than half of those over 70 who were asked could name a symptom other than a lump, with

¹⁶ Dewis Cymru. Health and medical check-ups. <https://www.dewis.wales/health-and-medical-check-ups>

¹⁷ Breast Cancer Care (2011) Improving outcomes and experiences for older women with breast cancer.

symptom awareness being higher among other age groups. Older women are also more likely to delay attending the GP with breast cancer symptoms.¹⁸

Despite this, women aged over 70 years are not automatically called for breast cancer screening. For many, the lack of awareness of the risk is exacerbated by a lack of awareness of the need to self-refer. We believe that this upper age limit for automatic invitations for screening should be removed. An ICM poll showed there is public support for this call: 83 per cent of people in Wales believe that women should be invited to routine breast cancer screening beyond the age of 70.¹⁹

Public policy proposals

- The Welsh Government must ensure that people across Wales have equitable access to the 'Add to your Life' checks; that older people are appropriately supported to undertake the health check; and that older people receive appropriate information and signposting
- The Welsh Government should monitor and evaluate the take-up and effectiveness of the 'Add to your Life' check to ensure that the checks are contributing effectively to improving the health of older people
- Local Health Boards should work with GPs to monitor uptake of health checks and screening programmes by different groups and take action to increase the reach of those that under-use the services, including those above the age for routine invitation
- The Welsh Government should publicise the objective justification for having upper-age limits on cancer screening. Where they cannot be clinically justified, for example breast cancer screening, age limits should be removed and automatic invitations to screening should continue.

Prevention and early intervention

Preventative health care services play a key role in promoting the health and wellbeing of older people. Services such as optometry, audiology, dentistry, physiotherapy and podiatry go right to the very heart of our ability to lead active and rewarding lives, but are a low priority in the modern, clinically driven NHS.

RNIB recommends an annual sight test for people aged 60 years and over. Even though sight tests in the UK are free for people aged 60 years and over, this entitlement is taken up by less than half of those who are eligible.²⁰ Increasing the uptake of sight tests, particularly for those in at risk groups, will help ensure early detection of eye disease and more timely access to treatment.

¹⁸ Public Health England (2015) Public Health England launches nationwide breast cancer awareness campaign.

¹⁹ Age Cymru ICM Poll 2012.

²⁰ RNIB Cymru (2011) Preventing sight loss in older people.

Work supported by the Social Services Improvement Agency identified that earlier interventions and a reablement approach to supporting people with dementia, incontinence, podiatry, dental needs, strokes and falls can result in maintaining independence at home and delay the need for high-end residential care.²¹ The third sector and public must be included in the development of local planning and commissioning strategies to improve appropriate preventative service provision across Wales.

Access to foot care services is vital to keep older people active and independent and to reduce the risk of falls, which are a major cause of serious injury and loss of confidence and independence in later life.

Falls prevention

The Ageing Well in Wales programme has identified the importance of reducing the impact and number of falls as a national issue that requires a coherent response. The Strategy for Older People²² recognises that fear of falling is reported as a key concern for older people and a major contributing factor to their social isolation. In 2015, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) estimated that nearly 15,000 falls in Wales could be avoided through the use of physiotherapy-led preventative interventions.²³

Falls should not be viewed as an inevitable part of growing older, and older people in contact with healthcare professionals, in particular GPs, should be asked routinely whether they have had or are at risk of a fall, and should be considered for multifactorial interventions, in line with NICE Guidelines²⁴ for falls and older people. Healthcare professionals should routinely follow NICE Guidelines regarding falls and older people.

Reablement

Reablement helps people learn or re-learn the skills necessary for daily living, which have been lost through deterioration in health and/or increased support needs. Reablement services help to reduce demand on acute medical services and avoid inappropriate admission to residential care. Overall outcomes are extremely positive: over 70 per cent of people who received reablement services did not require further ongoing support.²⁵

²¹ SSIA/John Bolton (2011) Better Support at Lower Cost, Section 4: Prevention.

²² Welsh Government (2013) The Strategy for Older People 2013-2023.

²³ CSP (2015) Physiotherapy could prevent 14,600 serious falls in Wales every year (available at: <http://www.csp.org.uk/news/2015/01/20/physiotherapy-could-prevent-14600-serious-falls-wales-every-year>)

²⁴ NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2015). Falls in older people. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs86>

²⁵ SSIA (2014) Reablement Services in Wales, December 2014.

Under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, reablement is included under the preventative services provisions of Part 2. However, there are substantial inconsistencies in the services delivered by local authorities and health boards.²⁶ With no standard definition of 'reablement', some local authorities appear to spend ten times more per head of population than others on reablement services. There is also a tendency for public bodies to concentrate on services that focus on improving physical wellbeing. The Welsh Reablement Alliance stresses that to be effective, reablement must address physical, social and emotional needs. Improving emotional and social wellbeing is as important as improving physical wellbeing and equal emphasis needs to be given to each of these.

Public policy proposals

- The Welsh Government must prioritise preventative health care services, and give further direction to local authorities and Local Health Boards to ensure sustainable investment in services
- Health professionals, including in primary care, must provide access and referral to preventative measures such as regular eye tests, and advise and encourage older people to adopt healthy lifestyles and take up available preventative measures
- The Welsh Government must improve access to foot care services for all older people in Wales. The fairest way to do this would be with a statutory funded service, providing basic foot care, free at the point of use across Wales.
- The Welsh Government must provide public information on falls prevention for older people, and ensure that all older people who have experienced a fall are able to access a structured 'strength and balance' exercise programme
- The Welsh Government must provide stronger direction to care homes in Wales to improve access to health and care services for residents, such as regular access to GPs, dentists, opticians and audiologists
- The views and needs of older people must be reflected in the population needs assessments which should then inform local joint commissioning. This should include adequate commissioning for common conditions, including footcare, dentistry, sensory impairment, incontinence, arthritis and depression.
- The Welsh Government must introduce a statutory duty on local authorities and Local Health Boards to provide integrated reablement services spanning housing, health and social care
- Local Health Boards, with local authorities, must deliver high quality reablement services in partnership with third sector organisations which include social support as well as physical rehabilitation and home adaptations. These services must be well integrated with any other services that promote independence and wellbeing.

²⁶ Ibid.