



**Older People's Commissioner for Wales**  
**Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru**

# **Response from the Older People's Commissioner for Wales**

**to the**

## **National Assembly for Wales 'Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee' consultation**

### **September 2016**

For more information regarding this response please contact:

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## **About the Commissioner**

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people across Wales, standing up and speaking out on their behalf. She works to ensure that those who are vulnerable and at risk are kept safe and ensures that all older people have a voice that is heard, that they have choice and control, that they don't feel isolated or discriminated against and that they receive the support and services they need. The Commissioner's work is driven by what older people say matters most to them and their voices are at the heart of all that she does. The Commissioner works to make Wales a good place to grow older - not just for some but for everyone.

The Older People's Commissioner:

- Promotes awareness of the rights and interests of older people in Wales.
- Challenges discrimination against older people in Wales.
- Encourages best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales.
- Reviews the law affecting the interests of older people in Wales.

## **Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee**

1. As the Older People's Commissioner for Wales I welcome the opportunity to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee consultation<sup>1</sup>.
2. There are almost 800,000 people aged 60 and over in Wales, over a quarter of the population. In the next twenty years this is expected to exceed one million people. Older people have a wealth of skills, knowledge and experience and, provided with sufficient support and an adequate infrastructure that includes access to education and lifelong learning, they can contribute significantly to society and to the economy.

There are two areas that I would like to highlight with the Committee.

### **Access to learning opportunities for older people: Community-Based Learning / Lifelong Learning and Skills**

3. Lifelong learning is a vital component in helping older people to live healthy and independent lives. It provides opportunities to stay active and participate in society as well as avoiding the negative effects of digital exclusion. The importance of education for older people has been recognised in the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, which includes a right for older people to access appropriate educational and training programmes<sup>2</sup> and in the Welsh Government's Declaration of Rights for Older People in Wales, which highlights older people's right to "continue learning, developing and growing"<sup>3</sup>.
4. Despite this recognition of the importance of lifelong learning to older people, only 1 in 20 learners in further or community

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<sup>1</sup> National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee (2016 ) Consultation: Priorities for Children, Young People and Education Committee <http://www.senedd.assembly.wales/mgConsultationDisplay.aspx?ID=214>

<sup>2</sup> Older People's Commissioner for Wales, UN Principles. <http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/en/about/UN-principles.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government (2014) Declaration of Rights for Older People in Wales <http://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/140716olderen.pdf>

education is aged 65 or over with the number of older people participating decreasing by a third since 2005/06<sup>4</sup>.

5. Funding for adult community learning (ACL) has also been reduced significantly (by 37.5% in 2014/15 budget alone), while budgets for part-time further education have reduced by a third<sup>5</sup>. The scale of these reductions will mean fewer opportunities for older people to learn new skills, contribute to economic growth and gain from health and wellbeing benefits, community cohesion and social mobility. As older people are over-represented amongst ACL learners, the budgetary reductions for community learning will have a disproportionate impact on older people.
6. If funding for lifelong learning continues to follow this trend, there will be a high price to pay for failing to invest in learning opportunities for older people with a growing need to keep older people in the workforce and bring them back into work as well.
7. Opportunities for lifelong learning are important for older people that wish to further their skills for employment as well as those that want to continue to be active participants in society during retirement. For these reasons ensuring that older people have better access to learning and skills opportunities is a priority strand within the Ageing Well in Wales programme<sup>6</sup>, and it also contributes to the preventative, outcomes-focused approach taken by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. The Committee may wish to assess the impact of funding reductions to community and part-time learning during the last Assembly on these opportunities for older people.

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<sup>4</sup> Age Alliance Wales (2012) Wales: A Good Place to Grow Old?  
<http://www.agealliancewales.org.uk/wales-a-good-place-to-grow-old>

<sup>5</sup> BBC Wales News (2014) Criticism over cuts to adult learning budgets in Wales  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-25755799>

<sup>6</sup> Ageing Well in Wales <http://www.ageingwellinwales.com/en/home>

## Impact of funding decisions on people aged 50+ entering further or higher education

8. Access to higher and further education is essential for older people for a number of reasons. With an increasing number of older people unable to afford retirement and needing to work for longer, both higher and further education opportunities are crucial to up-skill or re-skill older people to remain in or re-enter the labour market and enhance their employability.
9. As well as the benefit to themselves, older people can contribute greatly to colleges and universities both inside and outside the classroom, and can inspire, advise and work with younger students as mentors through their considerable wealth of knowledge and experience.
10. However, at a time when older people should be encouraged into entering further and higher education, statistics actually show the proportion of older adults who are engaged in learning and studying in further education colleges and universities has halved from 35% to just 17% between 2005 and 2012<sup>7</sup>.
11. The impact of budget reductions to further education has been particularly damaging to older people. Between 2006/7 and 2010/11 courses funded by the Welsh Government saw the number of older people (50+) participating drop by 32%, twice as much as for adults as a whole. Between 2003/4 and 2011/12 there was also a 43% decrease in the number of learners supported by Welsh Government funding. Over the same period there was a 20% reduction in the proportion of learners over 50 in further education provision<sup>8</sup>.
12. In higher education, it is difficult to measure the participation rates of people over 60. The current HEFCW reports on participation rates in higher education in Wales only include

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<sup>7</sup> Wales Online (2012) Fewer older people going to college, but more learn online <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/fewer-older-people-going-college-2019163>

<sup>8</sup> Stats Wales <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Search?Query=llwr>

learners up to the age of 59, limiting the ability for detailed information on older people's participation in higher education<sup>9</sup>. Whilst higher education institutions in Wales are active, at differing levels, in widening access for older people through their fee plans<sup>10</sup>, more can be done to support and encourage older people into higher education to enable them to continuing learning and develop their skills.

13. Older people should have the same opportunities to access higher education as everyone else. The Committee may wish to consider how funding decisions made by the Welsh Government in relation to the budgets for further and higher education, especially in support for part-time learning, have impacted on older people's access to further and higher education and henceforth on their quality of life and employment prospects.

14. I hope that these issues provide the Committee with useful information. I look forward to working with the Committee and others on these issues over the coming months and years. Should you require any further information then please do not hesitate to contact me.

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<sup>9</sup> HEFCW (2013) Participation rates for Welsh students in HE within the UK during 2012/13 [http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/about\\_he\\_in\\_wales/statistics/participation\\_rates.aspx](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/about_he_in_wales/statistics/participation_rates.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> WISERD (2015) Access to Higher Education in Wales: A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [http://wiserd.ac.uk/files/4014/4257/0990/WISERD -  
\\_Access to Higher Education F1.pdf](http://wiserd.ac.uk/files/4014/4257/0990/WISERD_-_Access_to_Higher_Education_F1.pdf)