

North Wales Regional Committee

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Date: 19 May 2006

Time: 10.00 - 12.30

Venue: Craig Y Don Community Centre, Llandudno.

Title: Age Concern North Wales Central. Fire Service Provision in North Wales.



North Wales Central

Canol Gogledd Cymru

Fire Service Provision in North Wales

Age Concern North Wales Central welcomes this opportunity to submit its views to this meeting of the North Wales Regional Committee of the Assembly. As an organisation, we are on record in our appreciation of its the value and importance and we attend as often as possible either as contributors or as observers.

In case you don't already know, Age Concern is the UK's leading charity working for and on behalf of older people. There are over 11 million people of pensionable age in the UK, representing the most

rapidly-growing age group, and older people make a massive contribution to the economy and to society. Here in Conwy and also in neighbouring Denbighshire, older people aged over 65+ make up over a quarter of the population. So-called 'baby boomers' have now joined the ranks of 'older people' and it is little wonder that our politicians and policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of our importance and why they deem it vital to take note of our views when planning services.

Why is it then that older people still feel marginalised and ignored?

In North Wales, this is particularly true in rural areas, where concerns are often raised with us about public transport, housing, accessibility to medical and other services and the closure of banks, post offices and adequate coverage and availability of emergency services. Why is it that all of us over a certain age, whether we live in urban or rural areas, still feel discriminated against as employees, health care users or as consumers? The discrimination felt by older people is deep-seated and based on assumptions that we suddenly become less capable or less deserving of good treatment. Age discrimination is the most common form of prejudice and 29% of adults suffer from it each year. If we only take one key message away from today's meeting then let it be that older people are able, are deserving of good treatment and that we do form a large and diverse sector of the community. We will no longer settle for being categorised or dismissed in any sort of stereotypical fashion. We ask service planners and providers to acknowledge this diversity when planning or altering services. We recognise that additional support might well be needed by some of us to enable us to remain in our own homes but it is a fundamental right for us all to live for as long as possible in our own good quality housing with as much security of tenure as possible. We need to be confident however that, when the time is right, we will have access to good quality help and advice in order to maintain our independence.

Good health and well-being is more than just an absence of illness. If people are housed properly and do not feel socially excluded or anxious, their physical and mental health are more likely to be good. Age Concern campaigns on such issues as a fair and adequate income for older people so that we can make choices for ourselves. In the context of home safety and security, it is right and proper for older people to live in well-maintained homes of the highest quality and that our homes incorporate all the latest facilities and home safety measures. This is why Age Concern North Wales Central works so closely with partners to sign-post our clients to the best possible advice and assistance on safety and home security.

In this context we applaud the increased emphasis shown by North Wales Fire Service on fire prevention and how the service is modernising. Whilst fire-fighting is still an important aspect of the Fire Service's work, we congratulate the Service on its increased emphasis on reaching out into the community and in particular to its more vulnerable members. Clearly this work relies heavily on the number and quality of referrals which are received and I believe that Age Concern and others can help because our officers and volunteers visit older people in their own homes. As agencies like ours gather and share information with the Fire Service and other agencies, we're confident that those at most risk can be targeted more effectively in their fire prevention and fire safety campaigns. Other agencies visiting older people's homes - like meals on wheels, can also help and play their part in this work. We therefore urge people to take full advantage of the Fire Service's free-phone number and have their homes risk assessed and a

free smoke alarm fitted. The success of this campaign depends heavily on the number of referrals the Service receives- so we all have a part to play. Other agencies can also help by signing up to and honouring information and data gathering protocols so that the Fire Service receives all the latest information it needs to target its resources efficiently and effectively. For its part, we acknowledge the contribution that Welsh Assembly Government is making in funding smoke alarms, safer heaters, electric blankets and safer kitchen equipment.

For our part we caution against assumptions being made that, as we become older, we somehow all become less competent when it comes to home safety – indeed, the reverse is probably true. Realistically, we all know that older age can sometimes be complicated by poorer mobility, eyesight, hearing or in some cases loss of memory. We would argue that older people are more likely to be more aware of the dangers of fire than many of the younger generation. Didn't we grow up in homes with open fires when only a very small minority of houses had any form of central heating? If there's one thing older people hate, it's being patronised so we're pleased to note that safety advisers are now trained in improving their communication skills and that the message is being communicated bilingually reflecting our cultural and linguistic heritage. We are an increasingly multi-cultural society here in North Wales and there are many older people from minority ethnic backgrounds who must not be forgotten in any safety campaigns. We cannot emphasise enough the importance of supporting any campaign that will save lives – so let us have our homes checked for safety (after all it won't cost us anything). Let us also acknowledge that perhaps we might be more at risk as we become older or socially disadvantaged. If we think we fall into an at risk- category then the Fire Service want to hear from us.

As a campaigning and lobbying organisation, Age Concern can help by acting as a valuable sounding board for the views of older people. Whereas individuals often feel powerless to influence and change things, they feel more empowered if part of an Age Concern 'family'. Age Concern North Wales Central's mission is to promote and protect the interests of older people and in so doing to enhance the quality of their lives. We encourage and enable older people to become more involved and in particular we seek to engage with those people and communities who have been traditionally 'hard to reach'. We have thirteen service user forums throughout Conwy and Denbighshire which offer a unique opportunity for older people to comment on the quality and range of services provided. We use these Forums to inform policy makers about the views of Older People. In Conwy, we also have the 'Strategies for Living' service which enables older people to counter the effects of loneliness and distress in an innovative and flexible way. If you don't already do so, please consult us via our Forums and via any of our current projects on any major development or change within your service. I say this because, recently, our Forums have been involved in several consultation exercises. I am aware, for example that members of our Llandudno Forum expressed concern about the proposal to re-locate the aerial ladder platform from Llandudno to Bangor. We feel that these kind of proposals might have benefitted from consultation with our Forums and we warmly invite you to approach us at any time in the future. Our Forum members felt that the number of high rise properties and hotels in Llandudno merited retention of this facility in the town.

Finally, we at Age Concern North Wales Central are proud of our campaigning and lobbying work. Not only can we assist in putting forward the views of a large section of our community on local issues like

these, but we can also help to get a vital message across during our many talks and discussions with groups or societies of older people. We offer a free private and confidential Information/Advice and Advocacy Service which is available to people in their own homes and this in turn might also help in identifying issues which are relevant to today's discussions.

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