



Care & Repair Cymru

*Gwella cartrefi, newid bywydau
Improving homes, changing lives*

Introduction to Care & Repair

1. Care & Repair Cymru is Wales' Older People's Housing Champion. Our aim is to ensure that all older people in Wales can live independently in safe, warm, accessible homes. We are the national body for Care & Repair in Wales, representing 13 independent agencies operating in every county offering a wide range of home improvement services, tailored to client's needs and local circumstances. Last year we supported over 47,000 older people across Wales, carried out over 17,000 adaptations in the home to help prevent trips and falls, whilst delivering £14.5 million's worth of repair and improvement work to improve the health, safety and warmth in people's homes¹.
2. Care & Repair works with older people in the private housing sector, owner occupiers and private tenants. A third of our clients live alone, a third have a disability and two thirds are over 74 years old.
3. '70+ Cymru' is a specialist Wales-wide project led by Care & Repair Cymru tackling fuel poverty amongst older people in Wales. The project aims to improve the warmth, comfort, and quality of life for older owner occupiers and private tenants by providing advice and support on home energy saving techniques and housing improvements to enable them to heat their homes to over 70°F.

Committee Priorities for the Sixth Senedd

1. Climate Change

Care & Repair Cymru fully supports Welsh Government's aims to reach net zero by 2050.

¹ For more information, please see Care & Repair Cymru's 2019/20 Annual Report. Available at:
https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/9716/0130/8166/Annual_Report_19.20_E...pdf

Outlined priorities for the next 12-18 months mention a number of projects designed to make progress with respect to decarbonisation and energy efficiency. Any onus for decarbonisation of houses should not be overwhelmingly placed on homeowners. Technology that enables decarbonisation of private homes is currently expensive; funding – prioritising grants over loans – must be made available to consumers that need it, such as those living in homes with the lowest EPC ratings, those on low incomes or living in fuel poverty, or at risk of fuel poverty by Welsh Government's definitions. Grants would be a better option for many of our clients who would not have the financial means to pay back any loan, especially when considering interest repayments as well as time constraints. Ensuring funding is accessible in this way to everyone would not only begin to help the most vulnerable consumers and worst properties first, but also aligns with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act to ensure a resilient and equal Wales. This point is developed further in our section on housing priorities.

2. Energy

Care & Repair Cymru agrees with the Welsh Government's aims outlined in this priority point, including placing fossil fuels at the bottom of Wales' fuel hierarchy and Welsh Government's aims for Net Zero. While we agree that Wales has a strong base to grow its renewable energy sector, there are Welsh-specific issues that make decarbonisation of housing in particular a pressing challenge. Ensuring benefits of renewable energy, including financial savings and warmer homes, are passed on to older owner/occupiers and private tenants throughout Wales will be key to ensuring the success of Wales' renewable energy plans.

One problem in particular with Welsh houses is their age: Wales has the oldest housing stock in Europe². Many vulnerable older people with whom Care & Repair agencies work already struggle to heat their homes efficiently and experience severe fuel poverty. Additionally, 21% of Welsh houses are off the gas-grid³. These properties may not be compatible with many retrofit proposals, including those reliant on hydrogen, but would lend themselves to solar or wind power, among other types of renewable electricity to heat and power the property. These properties tend to be older, rural properties, so may be less energy efficient. As such, funding will be needed for the retrofitting for Wales' most vulnerable older people, as well as to ensure their homes are properly insulated and free from drafts to ensure they can fully benefit from the scheme. issues with these rural homes, and Wales' wider housing stock, will also be picked up in Priority 12 (Housing).

Support will also be necessary for those in living in fuel poverty. In Wales, one in five older people live in fuel poverty, with those on pension credit at the

² https://files.bregroup.com/bretrust/The-Housing-Stock-of-the-United-Kingdom_Report_BRE-Trust.pdf

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/decarbonising-welsh-homes-stage-1-report.pdf>

greatest risk. Our 70+ Cymru project helped 80 older people who were struggling with fuel poverty between February and April 2021⁴, with many Care & Repair Cymru clients relying on WHD or NEST schemes. Future iterations of these schemes will need to provide new, greener technology as well as ensure a “fabric first” approach as above.

Under current Welsh Government schemes, replacement heating options are limited to gas. While this is invaluable in the current landscape and helps keep people warm, alleviates fuel poverty, and improves people’s health, the schemes must be adapted to ensure that schemes are future proofed and greener heating technologies are available. With Welsh Government’s aims for new housing to not use fossil fuel fired boilers, any boilers currently offered on Welsh Government schemes need to be compatible with future technologies or more environmentally friendly than they currently are⁵. Technologies such as heat pumps or gas condenser boilers are just two potential alternative heating measures but are more expensive than traditional boilers. As fewer and fewer houses rely on gas heating in the coming years, it is important that these consumers are not left on an antiquated system reliant on fossil fuels. These schemes should ensure equitable access to heating for everyone as well as equitable access to environmentally friendly means to do so. Importantly, environmental targets – while admirable and important – cannot be met at the expense of already-vulnerable consumers.

To ensure this is the case, we would encourage collaboration between the Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure committee and Ministers and their Social Justice counterparts, to ensure that environmental targets are met in a fair way, with equal access to all, without vulnerable consumers becoming more and more reliant on antiquated heating systems in the coming years.

3. Marine Energy Programme

N/A

4. Net Zero

C&RC agrees with the broad targets outlined in the Committee’s priorities but reiterates the need to not put vulnerable older people in detriment to accomplish the goals. Additionally, we would like to see more information about decarbonisation and other programmes integral to achieving net zero by 2050 without delay. There should also be frequent audits and reports on how work is going, and whether 2050 remains a feasible target.

Moreover, retrofitting programmes should be implemented in the housing sector and not just the public sector; this should also extend to private owner-

⁴ Care and Repair Cymru’s Annual Report 2020-2021, Forthcoming

⁵ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-08/development-quality-requirements-forhousing-associations.pdf> (p. 3)

occupiers and renters, for whom support should be made available for those who lack the means to carry out the necessary work. Welsh housing is responsible for 21% of carbon emissions⁶, and is a sector that needs decarbonising desperately if Wales is to reach its Net Zero targets.

5. Tree Planting

N/A

6. Nature and Biodiversity

N/A

7. Circular Economy

N/A

8. Environment

Care & Repair Cymru welcomes the Committee's commitment to cleaner air, and the notion of a *Clean Air Act for Wales*. Poor air quality adversely affects older people. In 2010, the UK Government estimated that health issues caused by air pollution cost at least £8billion⁷.

Improving air quality in Wales would save the Welsh NHS money, as well as prevent older people dying prematurely.

9. Transport

We welcome the Older People's Commissioner's report on transport and its importance for accessing healthcare⁸, which highlights the importance of this service for older people and highlights gaps – especially during and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as ensures that older people can continue to live independent lives and remain a valued part of the community. This not only reflects the UK Government's Resilience strategy and its aims for a "whole-of-society" approach to community, but also again ensures resilience and equality in Wales outlined in the *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act* as well as ensuring a "Wales of Cohesive Communities".

⁶ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/decarbonising-welsh-homes-stage-1report.pdf> (p. 6)

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-air-pollution/health-matters-air-pollution>

⁸ https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/Accessing_Health_Services_in_Wales_Transport_Issues_and_Barriers.sflb.ashx

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales' report also highlights issues with transport and equality: "accessibility issues [and] a lack of information to assist with journey planning" need to be improved on public transport to ensure that older people are able to access public transport equitably and easily⁹.

10. Digital Infrastructure

We are calling for a right to digital connectivity across Wales. For this reason, we are pleased to see the Committee's work to improve online connections throughout Wales and especially in rural areas, however a right to digital connectivity will prompt the urgent action required to ensure digital connectivity is available across Wales.

Having a good connection is just one part of the infrastructure puzzle. Wales also requires an infrastructure of knowledge. Encouraging older people to take up online connections that they already have will also be key to ensuring connected communities, and bridge the digital divide worsened by the pandemic. Third Sector or industry partners can facilitate older people in learning new digital skills in a safe, accessible environment. Additionally, if an older person requires a new device such as a laptop or smartphone to fully benefit from good digital infrastructure, local councils should be encouraged to explore the possibility of technology grants to encourage technology use amongst older populations in their locality.

11. Digital and Data

We are calling for a right to digital connectivity. Only 49% of people over 75 use the internet in Wales¹⁰. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we heard of older people struggling to stay in contact with people due to isolation, shielding, or lockdowns. Similarly, the flurry to move to digital during the covid-19 pandemic has had serious ramifications for those not online in accessing their rights and services as citizens - this has been especially apparent in healthcare – and is something that must be addressed as an urgent priority going forwards if we are to have a Wales that is truly equal, cohesive and 'the best place to grow old'.

Our hopes for digital were outlined in our 2021 Election manifesto¹¹, as was the need to ensure that older people have access to technology that supports independent living, and that all technology is accessible for people with complex needs such as sensory loss. Digital must not just mean 'the internet'.

⁹ [https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/Accessing Health Services in Wales - Transport Issues and Barriers - Summary of findings and action to date.sflb.ashx](https://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/Accessing_Health_Services_in_Wales_-_Transport_Issues_and_Barriers_-_Summary_of_findings_and_action_to_date.sflb.ashx) (p. 5)

¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-09/internet-use-and-digital-skillsnational-survey-wales-april-2018-march-2019-207.pdf> (p. 5)

¹¹ https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/2116/0750/8185/CRC_2021_Manifesto_en.pdf (p. 10).

At Care & Repair we have been exploring ways to support older people to live safely and independently at home, supported by technology.

Digital at home doesn't have to be complicated to be innovative. Bridgend Care & Repair hosted our Alexa pilot, via Rockwool funding, to help support independent living at home. The project identified 30 vulnerable people, from Dementia services or from Hospital Discharges, with health conditions or recognised risks of falling. The outcome benefits for the clients were:

- 12 addressing loneliness & isolation
- 19 reminders/prompts for care needs
- 4 family 'drop-ins' for managing risks
- 5 supporting shopping
- 26 stimulation (music/talking books, etc.)

Something as simple of voice recognition to turn on the lights can prevent falls, and thus prevent unscheduled hospital admissions amongst older people. We believe additional support and funding for pilots such as the Alexa project should be further explored as a way of working collaboratively cross-sector and cross-governmentally to meet concurrent priorities for both health, housing and digital. Care & Repair already has experience of using technology – both specifically with this Alexa Pilot – but also pan-Wales throughout our *Managing Better* service – and would be happy to provide any additional information on our work in this space.

We also welcome and look forward to the implementation of points raised in the Digital Strategy for Wales, especially around prioritising older people, and ensuring that they are able to access training for new digital technologies and that these are accessible for all.

12. Housing

In addition to the environmental housing issues already raised in this response such as the optimised retrofit programme – the importance of which we would like to reiterate here – housing issues are far more widespread than purely environmental.

Poor housing conditions mean older people are living in unfit housing which is unsuitable for their needs. The Welsh Housing Condition survey conducted in 2017-2018 revealed that 18% of older homes have Category 1 hazards present¹². These hazards can lead to a number of physical health issues such as falls, respiratory illness, and increased risk of heart attacks or strokes, as well as mental health issues; all of which could be prevented by simple

¹² https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-02/181206-welsh-housingconditions-survey-headline-report-2017-18-en_0.pdf (p. 10)

repairs¹³. Fixing these issues and thus bringing Welsh housing to an acceptable standard would save the NHS around £95million per year¹⁴, as well as preserve properties for future use. Care and Repair agencies carried out a total of £14.5 million worth of repairs and improvement work in 2019/20, which highlights the lack of governmental support for owner/occupiers or private renters. With 83% of older people living in their own homes, they turn to us due to a lack of support. However, Care & Repair caseworkers note that there is millions of pounds' worth of essential repairs that we are unable to carry out every year due to a lack of funding. Care & Repair Cymru advocates for a right to decent housing to be enshrined in law, and clear minimum standards to be in place for private sector housing. There should also be a national safety net programme for vulnerable older homeowners that should be made available to Care and Repair agencies for us to carry out essential maintenance and improvement works¹⁵.

Our *Hospital to a Healthier Home* service¹⁶ put the spotlight on this issue: when an older person has a fall at home, it is more likely to result in their hospitalisation than other age groups. Falls at home among older people cost the NHS £2.6billion per year¹⁶. Moreover, there is potential for 43% of hospital beds to be occupied by an older patient who has fallen in any given month, putting preventable strain on NHS services when repairing a hazard at their property would mean they were less likely to fall. In addition to this, cold, damp homes increase circulatory, respiratory, and cardiovascular diseases which could have been prevented had the hazards been repaired. *Our Hospital to a Healthier Home* service found that when repairs were carried out on older patients' homes, there was a reduction of 38% in admissions of people over 60 years old to hospital, and a 26% reduction in falls from properties that Care & Repair agencies repaired or adapted.

Our Manifesto reflects the importance of prevention in healthcare and advocates for barriers between health and housing to be broken down, ensuring quick and equitable access for older people to the services they need¹⁷. Adaptations are the quickest and easiest way to reduce hazards and risks in older peoples' homes, and Care and Repair agencies adapted 19,025 homes in 2019/20, with an average waiting time of just seven days.

Poor housing can also result in fuel poverty: many older people are unable to efficiently heat their homes due to poor heating systems, poor insulation, drafts throughout their home, and a multitude of other issues. NEST and Warm Home

¹³ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Home-and-dry-report.pdf> (p. 4, p. 13)

¹⁴ https://files.bregroup.com/bretrust/The-Cost-of-Poor-Housing_Report_BRE-Trust_English.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/2116/0750/8185/CRC_2021_Manifesto_en.pdf (p. 3)

¹⁶

https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/2715/6578/0045/Hospital_to_a_Healthier_Home_Winter_Pressures_Pilot_Evaluation_E.pdf

¹⁶ https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/2116/0750/8185/CRC_2021_Manifesto_en.pdf (p. 7)

¹⁷ https://www.careandrepair.org.uk/files/2116/0750/8185/CRC_2021_Manifesto_en.pdf (p. 5)

Discounts schemes are a lifeline to many, but there is no support for vulnerable older people whose homes are inefficient to heat, even with rebates. The Programme also highlights the need to ensure a “fabric first, whole house approach”, which fits with PAS2035, saving money for Welsh Government in the long run and ensures that the current housing stock will be fit for purpose for years to come.

13: Town Centre Regeneration

In a similar vein to our response to the Transport priority, town centre regeneration must ensure accessibility to these public spaces to allow older people to live independently and be valued members of their communities. It will also help to counteract some of the problems older people face with isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic by ensuring that older people can safely access their communities after not being able to do so during lockdowns.

Independent living starts at home. Ensuring that all older people can live in safe, secure housing will be key to ensuring that older people are not further ostracised and separated from their communities.