



Public Policy Statement

Health interventions and preventative services

January 2024

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Background

The overall physical and mental health of the older population of Wales has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic. Delays in medical procedures and the suspension of many routine health checks, as well as the broader difficulties of living through lockdown, have left many older people worse off in terms of health and wellbeing than before 2020. Matters have been made worse by the growing cost of living in recent years, which has made it harder for people of all ages to live a healthy and independent lifestyle. This in turn has had an effect on the NHS, placing greater pressure on services that are already struggling to clear the backlog of cases from the pandemic.¹

It is now more urgent than ever that effective preventative services and health interventions are provided to older people across Wales. These services are vital to improving the physical and mental health of older people and to helping them to live more independently. In doing so, they also play an important role in relieving pressures on NHS services.

While the preventative services and health interventions discussed in this statement are vital to maintaining population health in the short term, they should not be considered a replacement for longer-term, structural improvements to people's quality of life. Often, the most effective form of preventative care is a holistic improvement to quality of life. Access to adequate housing, education, food, leisure facilities and green spaces, and other important factors in day-to-day life can help us live longer, healthier lives and reduce our need to use NHS services.

¹ Welsh Government Scientific Evidence Advice (SEA) (2023) NHS in 10+ years: An examination of the projected impact of Long-Term Conditions and Risk Factors in Wales.

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 and accessible 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 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 and bowel cancer screenings should be removed. Lastly, GPs in Wales should offer annual holistic health check-ups of older people as standard.

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. In particular, access to NHS dental care has become much more difficult across Wales since the pandemic, in part due to backlogs from lockdown. This has resulted in many older people being unable to have dental treatment or being forced to pay for private treatment.² In addition, 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 preventative 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.

Free prescriptions must remain in place for all users of NHS services in Wales.

² Senedd Research (2022), 'Dentistry Part 1 – Can you access dental care when you need it?', <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/dentistry-part-1-can-you-access-dental-care-when-you-need-it/>.

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. This includes the provision of community transport to and from services/activities and the use of accessible language in all official information supplied on healthy lifestyles. 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 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 that 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 ensure that its successor plan for tackling substance misuse has an appropriate focus on substance misuse in older people, including the misuse of POM and OTC.
- The Welsh Government ensure that its new mental health strategy serves the needs of older people. To do so, it must emphasise the importance of person-centred care and equity of access.
- Free health checks with a GP should be offered to older people on an annual basis, with no upper age limit applied. Older people must be appropriately supported to undertake the health check and receive appropriate information and signposting.
- The Welsh Government must ensure that people across Wales have equitable access to the 'Add to your Life' checks. The 'Add to your Life' checks should also be monitored and evaluated to ensure that checks are being used and are contributing effectively to improving the health of older people.
- Older people should be fully involved in making decisions about their prescriptions, and care should be taken by practitioners to avoid inappropriate polypharmacy. High-quality reviews of medication should be undertaken on a regular basis for older people with long-term prescriptions to ensure that they do not experience side effects.
- 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.

- 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 and bowel cancer screening, age limits should be removed and automatic invitations to screening should continue.
- GPs should proactively engage with men over the age of 50 (and particularly with those from more at-risk groups) to inform them about prostate cancer and access to free PSA tests. Positive PSA test results should be followed by an MRI test as standard, to minimise the chance of misdiagnosis before beginning the biopsy procedure.
- 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 ensure that older people are able to continue to access NHS dentistry services. Achieving this will mean resolving the persistent problems of recruitment and staff retention in NHS dentistry in 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. It is also imperative that younger people are included in falls awareness campaigns, so that they can recognise and respond correctly when older people experience a fall.
- 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, audiologists and mental health practitioners.
- 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. Reablement services should be provided in partnership with third sector organisations which include social support as well as physical rehabilitation and home adaptations.
- The NHS in Wales must continue to offer free prescriptions to all users of the health service.

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.

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

Despite this, the National Survey for Wales shows that older adults are more likely to lead unhealthy lifestyles.⁴ Adults aged between 45 and 64 were the most likely to be either overweight or obese (68-69%). People aged between 55 and 64 were also the heaviest drinkers of any age group, with 24% drinking more than the weekly recommended alcohol intake of 14 units. While smoking has shown a continual decrease in recent decades, a significant number of people still regularly smoke, with 13% of 45–64-year-olds self-reporting as a regular smoker. Smoking remains a key cause of ill-health, especially later in life.⁵

The proportion of adults who reported doing at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week was highest among younger adults and decreased with age thereafter. Of people aged 55-64, only 50% claimed to do the recommended 150 minutes per week, dropping to 46% of people aged 65 and over.

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 nature of the message and the channels used to communicate healthy lifestyle

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

⁴ StatsWales (2023), 'Adult lifestyles by age and gender, 2021-21 onwards, [Adult lifestyles by age and gender, 2020-21 onwards \(gov.wales\)](#).

⁵ Welsh Government Scientific Evidence Advice (SEA) (2023) NHS in 10+ years: An examination of the projected impact of Long-Term Conditions and Risk Factors in Wales.

information must be proactive and age-appropriate, and must use language that is accessible to a broad audience of older people.

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.⁶ 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 and/or public transport to access more distant 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, whilst early-onset drinkers may face chronic health conditions as they grow older.⁷ A report by Alcohol Concern Cymru concluded that a number of factors linked to age, such as bereavement or disruption to lifestyle following retirement, can lead to heavier drinking.⁸

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.⁹ Recent studies have also revealed a rise in dangerous alcohol use among older people during the Covid-19 lockdown. A report by the National Institute for Health Research indicates that, while the majority over-50s maintained the same level of alcohol consumption as before the pandemic, most of those who changed their consumption rate reported an increase during this period, with evidence suggesting that many drank to hazardous levels.¹⁰ In addition, people aged 55-74 who had pre-existing mental health concerns were more likely to drink at levels that were 'indicative of probably alcohol dependency' over lockdown.¹¹ Alcohol-related deaths increased dramatically among older populations in Wales over 2020-21.¹²

Older adults, as a group, are more likely than earlier generations to develop substance misuse problems. Older adults – particularly those over 65 – use large amounts of prescriptions and over-the-counter medication and unintended

⁶ National Assembly for Wales (2017) Public Health (Wales) Act 2017 - Research Briefing.

⁷ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2015) Alcohol and older people.

⁸ Alcohol Concern Cymru (2011): Hidden harm? Alcohol and older people in Wales.

⁹ Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse (APoSM) (2017) Substance Misuse in an Ageing Population.

¹⁰ Beth Bareham et al., 'Exploring older people's support needs for making healthier decisions about alcohol during Covid-19' (Briefing Report), National Institute for Health Research (NIHR): Older People and Frailty Policy Research Unit (October 2021).

¹¹ Rahul Rao, Christoph Mueller and Matthew Broadbent, 'Risky alcohol consumption in older people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom', *Journal of Substance Use* (27.1) 2022, pp. 212-217.

¹² Office for National Statistics (2022) Alcohol-specific deaths by sex, age group and individual cause of death (Dataset).

dependency or misuse can be a problem.¹³ The number of older people seeking support for substance misuse in Wales has increased rapidly in recent years, mirroring trends across the UK.¹⁴

The Welsh Government's Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019-2022 included a key action to 'ensure services meet the needs of older people in relation to reducing harm surrounding both drug and alcohol use (including Prescription Only Medicines)'.¹⁵ This involved the implementation of a communication strategy to highlight the risks of unsafe alcohol consumption in over-50s, plans to provide further support for families and carers of people who misuse substances and to tackle dependence on prescription only medicines (POM) and over the counter medicines (OTC). While this plan has now expired, the Welsh Government has begun consulting on a successor plan.¹⁶

Furthermore, 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. This is particularly the case following the pandemic, during which time the mental health of many older people got worse due to long periods of isolation and fears around transmitting Covid-19.¹⁷ 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. Adequate care for mental health needs must also extend to older people living in care homes, including those living with dementia.¹⁸

The Welsh Government is currently consulting on its new mental health strategy, consisting of 5 broad vision statements and 10 cross-cutting principles.¹⁹ There are several particular aspects of their proposals that we strongly support and would like to see included in the new strategy. These include the key principle that any future mental health strategy must adopt a personalised approach to care, ensuring that individual circumstances (including age) are placed at the centre of any action. We also support the principle of equity of access to mental health care, meaning a commitment to remove any personal barriers to good mental health care, including old age.

Sexual health

Our research suggests that there is a lack of engagement with older adults around sexual health, with sexual services still being largely directed towards younger

¹³ Welsh Government (2022) Prescriptions in Wales: April 2021 to March 2022.

¹⁴ Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse (2017) Substance Misuse in an Ageing Population; Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2019) Ageing cohort of drug users.

¹⁵ Welsh Government (2019) Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2018-2022.

¹⁶ Welsh Government (2022) Strengthening substance misuse support for young people and families.

¹⁷ Age Cymru (2021) Experiences of people aged 50 or over in Wales during the winter Covid-19 lockdown, and the road to recovery.

¹⁸ Age Cymru (2023) Good mental health in care homes.

¹⁹ Welsh Government (2023) Mental health strategy.

people. This is despite the fact that, according to Public Health Wales's 2023 report on sexual health, STI diagnoses among over-55s were rising before the pandemic and, despite a brief dip in figures in 2020, have recovered and continued to rise since.²⁰ We believe that focus is 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. This includes the provision of community transport to and from services/activities and the use of accessible language in all official information supplied on healthy lifestyles. 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 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 ensure that its successor plan for tackling substance misuse has an appropriate focus on substance misuse in older people, including the misuse of POM and OTC.
- The Welsh Government ensure that its new mental health strategy serves the needs of older people. To do so, it must emphasise the importance of person-centred care and equity of access.

²⁰ Public Health Wales (2023) Sexual Health in Wales: Sexually Transmitted Infections, Emergency and Long-acting Reversible Contraception provision and Termination of Pregnancy – Annual report 2023.

Screening and health checks

GP health checks

At present, the NHS offers free health checks once every five years to people aged between 40 and 74 and who do not have a pre-existing condition.²¹ These checks examine the patient for risks of heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, strokes and other potentially life-threatening conditions, as well as dementia in over-65s. However, it is unclear as to how widely these health checks are offered and taken up by patients.

While we support the use of holistic health checks, we believe that health checks should be offered on an annual basis as part of GP contracts (particularly for older people). We also support removing the upper age limit on NHS health checks.

'Add to your Life'

'Add to your Life'²² 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.

While 'Add to your Life' can be a useful tool, it must be made available to all older people across Wales, including those who are not digitally included. 'Add to your Life' should also be monitored and evaluated to make sure that older people are engaging with it and that it is contributing to improving their health.

Medication reviews

Over 80 million items of medication are prescribed by GPs in Wales each year, costing around £630 million.²³ The number of prescriptions made by GPs has increased steadily every year, with the most common medication being issued for conditions concerning the cardiovascular, central nervous and endocrine systems, together accounting for 60% of prescriptions.

The high rate at which medication is prescribed has led to concern, particularly around the potential effects side effects of medication on the health of older people. Common side effects of prescribed medication experienced by older people include nausea, dizziness, loss of appetite, depression, muscle weakness and delirium.

²¹ NHS (August 2023), NHS Health Check, [NHS Health Check - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk).

²³ Welsh Government (September 2022), Prescriptions in Wales: April 2021 to March 2022.

Those taking multiple medications (known as 'polypharmacy') are also at risk of medications interacting with each other, with a detrimental effect on the patient.

Research by Age UK suggests that as many as one in five prescriptions made to older people living at home (rather than in hospitals or care homes) may be inappropriate.²⁴ Furthermore, 6% of unplanned hospital admissions are caused by adverse reactions to prescription medications.

Older people should be fully involved in making decisions about their prescriptions, and care should be taken by practitioners to avoid inappropriate polypharmacy. Importantly, high-quality reviews of medication should be undertaken on a regular basis for older people who are prescribed long-term medication to ensure that they do not experience side effects.

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, as in the case of cancer. However, screening programmes such as those for breast and bowel cancer still do not routinely invite people over certain age boundaries.²⁵ This is despite the fact that 80% of cancer diagnoses occur in people aged over 60.²⁶ 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.²⁷ We therefore believe that the upper age limit for automatic invitations for cancer screening should be removed.

NHS Wales currently offers free breast cancer screening to women aged 50-70 every three years.²⁸ However, one third of women diagnosed with breast cancer are aged over 70, and a survey conducted by Public Health England showed that less than half of those over 70 who were asked could name a symptom other than a lump, with symptom awareness being higher among other age groups. Older women are also more likely to delay attending the GP with breast cancer symptoms.²⁹

Bowel cancer is another major risk to older people, having become the 4th most common cancer in Wales in recent years.³⁰ It is also the second deadliest cancer in

²⁴ Age UK (2019), More harm than good: Why more isn't always better with older people's medicines.

²⁵ Public Health Wales (2023) 'Breast Test Wales', [Breast screening - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#); Public Health Wales (2023) 'Bowel Screening Wales', [Bowel Screening - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#).

²⁶ Public Health Wales: Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit (2023) Cancer incidence in Wales, 2002 - 2020: Final release.

²⁷ Breast Cancer Care (2011) Improving outcomes and experiences for older women with breast cancer.

²⁸ Public Health Wales (2023) 'Breast Test Wales', [Breast screening - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#).

²⁹ Public Health England (2015) Public Health England launches nationwide breast cancer awareness campaign.

³⁰ Bowel Cancer UK (2018) Spotlight on bowel cancer in Wales.

Wales, killing around 900 people each year, though it is far less likely to kill if spotted early. At present, NHS Wales offers free bowel cancer screening every two years to people who live in Wales and are aged between 51 and 74.³¹

Prostate cancer

Prostate cancer is the most common form of cancer in men and is responsible for the second highest rate of cancer deaths in Wales (after lung cancer), with a rate of 42 per 100,000 people.³² Prostate cancer tends to affect men over the age of 50, and is more prevalent among men of Afro-Caribbean and African descent, as well as those who have family members who have experienced prostate cancer before the age of 60.³³

There is no single way of testing for prostate cancer. The most common method is via a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test, although these tests are controversial due to their reported unreliability.³⁴ A positive PSA result is usually – though not always – followed up by an MRI scan, and then a more invasive biopsy procedure.

There is currently no prostate cancer screening programme offered by the NHS in Wales. This is due to controversy around the reliability PSA tests and concerns around overdiagnosis and overtreatment. However, men are able to access free PSA tests (and follow-up procedures) if they wish, after discussing their symptoms with a GP.

While not perfect, PSA tests nonetheless represent an easily accessible first step towards identifying and treating cases of this common and preventable form of cancer. We therefore believe that GPs should more proactively engage with men over the age of 50 (and particularly with those from more at-risk groups) to inform them about prostate cancer and access to PSA tests. Furthermore, any PSA test should be followed by an MRI test as standard, to minimise the chance of misdiagnosis before beginning the biopsy procedure.

Public policy proposals

- Free health checks with a GP should be offered to older people on an annual basis, with no upper age limit applied. Older people must be appropriately supported to undertake the health check and receive appropriate information and signposting.

³¹ Public Health Wales (2023) 'Bowel Screening Wales', [Bowel Screening - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](https://www.nhs.uk/health-wales/bowel-screening-wales/).

³² Public Health Wales (2022) 'Cancer Mortality in Wales, 2002-2021', [Cancer mortality in Wales, 2002-2021 - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](https://www.nhs.uk/health-wales/cancer-mortality-in-wales-2002-2021/).

³³ Prostate Cancer UK (November 2022), 'Interim position on the PSA blood test in asymptomatic men', [Prostate Cancer UK position on the PSA blood test | Prostate Cancer UK](https://www.prostatecanceruk.org/interim-position-on-the-psa-blood-test-in-asymptomatic-men/).

³⁴ NHS 111 Wales (2023) 'Cancer of the prostate', [NHS 111 Wales - Health A-Z : Cancer of the prostate](https://www.nhs.uk/111-wales/health-a-z/cancer-of-the-prostate/).

- The Welsh Government must ensure that people across Wales have equitable access to the 'Add to your Life' checks. The 'Add to your Life' checks should also be monitored and evaluated to ensure that checks are being used and are contributing effectively to improving the health of older people.
- Older people should be fully involved in making decisions about their prescriptions, and care should be taken by practitioners to avoid inappropriate polypharmacy. High-quality reviews of medication should be undertaken on a regular basis for older people with long-term prescriptions to ensure that they do not experience side effects.
- 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.
- 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 and bowel cancer screening, age limits should be removed and automatic invitations to screening should continue.
- GPs should proactively engage with men over the age of 50 (and particularly with those from more at-risk groups) to inform them about prostate cancer and access to free PSA tests. Positive PSA test results should be followed by an MRI test as standard, to minimise the chance of misdiagnosis before beginning the biopsy procedure.

Prevention and early intervention

Preventative health care services play a key part in promoting the health and wellbeing of older people. They also fulfil an important role in reducing pressures on the NHS, as patients are seen before their health conditions can develop into more complex problems.³⁵ 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.

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.³⁶ Early interventions can also help medical and social workers to identify and address cases of abuse of older people. 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.

Lastly, the Welsh NHS must continue to offer free prescriptions to all users, regardless of age, ability or wealth. Free and unhindered access to prescription medication is vital to maintaining a healthy, active population.

Optometry

Sight loss is a major cause of preventable ill health among older people, with one in five over-75s and one in two people over 90 experiencing sight loss due to glaucoma, cataracts, age-related macular degeneration or other conditions.³⁷ The 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.³⁸ Increasing the uptake of sight tests, particularly for those in at risk groups, will help ensure early detection of conditions causing sight loss and more timely access to treatment.

Access to dentistry

Timely access to dentistry services is vital to maintaining good health. Poor oral health can cause pain and make it harder to speak, eat and take medication.³⁹ It is also linked to serious conditions such as malnutrition and aspiration pneumonia.

³⁵ Public Health Wales (2023) Our Strategic Plan 2023-2026.

³⁶ SSIA/John Bolton (2011) Better Support at Lower Cost, Section 4: Prevention.

³⁷ RNIB Cymru (2023) Impact Report 2022-2023; S. Biddyr and A. Jones, 'Preventing sight loss in older people', *Public Health*, 129.2 (2014), pp. 110-116.

³⁸ Biddyr and Jones, p. 111.

³⁹ Royal College of Surgeons: Faculty of Dental Surgery (2017) Improving older people's oral health.

Regular check-ups can prevent problems with oral health, as well as providing an opportunity for dentists to spot signs of other conditions, such as mouth cancer.⁴⁰

Despite this, patients are experiencing lengthy backlogs in access to NHS dental care in Wales. This is partly due to mass appointment cancellations during the pandemic, but also due to longer term problems around recruitment and staff retention in the sector.⁴¹ As of summer 2022, a reported 93% of NHS-contracted dentists in Wales were not receiving new adult patients.⁴² Furthermore, Community Dental Services (CDS) are experiencing problems in meeting patient needs, as backlogs in general services are pushing more patients towards CDS.

We believe that older people should not experience any delay in registration with NHS dental services, or in access to treatment. This includes access to CDS for those patients who are vulnerable or who have more complex health issues.

Access to podiatry services

Podiatry services play an important role in preventing falls, reducing the risk of infections, and relieving long-term pain. They can also help to detect early signs of serious health problems, such as a loss of circulation caused by diabetes.

Unfortunately, like dentistry, NHS podiatry in Wales is now under great strain, due to both pandemic backlogs and problems with recruitment and retention in the sector.⁴³ This has resulted in many older people being unable to access NHS podiatry services, placing them at greater risk of long-term health problems associated with poor foot health.

Fast access to NHS podiatry services will greatly improve the quality of life of many older people, while also ensuring that potentially more serious health conditions are spotted and addressed in their early stages.

Falls prevention

The Age friendly Wales strategy has identified the importance of reducing the impact and number of falls as an important part of enhancing the wellbeing of older people and one that requires a coherent response.⁴⁴

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 Guidelines⁴⁵ for falls and older people.

⁴⁰ Royal College of Surgeons: Faculty of Dental Surgery (2017) Improving older people's oral health.

⁴¹ British Dental Association (2022) Wales: Senedd spotlight on NHS dentistry.

⁴² Senedd Cymru: Health and Social Care Committee (2023) Dentistry.

⁴³ NHS Employers (2023) Employers' guide to podiatry.

⁴⁴ Welsh Government (2021) Age friendly Wales: our strategy for an ageing society.

⁴⁵ NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2017). Falls in older people.
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs86>

Healthcare professionals should routinely follow NICE Guidelines regarding falls and older people.

Younger people can play an important role in reducing both the number and impact of falls among older people.⁴⁶ It is therefore vital that younger people are made more aware of the risk of falls among older people, and have the necessary knowledge to respond to falls when they occur.

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.⁴⁷

Under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, reablement is included under the preventative services provisions of Part 2.⁴⁸ However, there are substantial inconsistencies in the services delivered by local authorities and health boards.⁴⁹ With no standard definition of 'reablement', some local authorities appear to spend several times more money 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. Improving emotional and social wellbeing is as important as improving physical wellbeing and equal emphasis needs to be given to each of these.

Free prescriptions

It is vital that free prescriptions continue to be made available via the NHS in Wales.

Continued access to free prescriptions is important to maintaining the health of older people, who are more likely to have long-term and complex health conditions. This is especially true of older people living on low fixed incomes, who may not be able to afford the cost of sudden changes to their medication.

As the population of Wales grows older, free prescriptions remain the best system for ensuring that older people are able to access the appropriate medication or other health support quickly and without hindrance.⁵⁰ Means-testing prescriptions is often a

⁴⁶ Age Cymru, 'Intergenerational falls prevention', <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru/our-work/promoting-health-and-wellbeing/falls/intergenerational-falls-prevention/>.

⁴⁷ SSIA (2014) Reablement Services in Wales, December 2014.

⁴⁸ Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2014/4/contents/enacted>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stats Wales (2022) 2020-based interim national population projections for Wales, 2020-2045, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Projections/National/2020-based/2020basedpopulationprojections-by-year-age>.

more expensive process than issuing prescriptions for free, and creates further barriers to those seeking to access medication. This will only increase pressures on the NHS, as more people are unable to manage their health conditions and are forced to resort to emergency care.

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 ensure that older people are able to continue to access NHS dentistry services. Achieving this will mean resolving the persistent problems of recruitment and staff retention in NHS dentistry in 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. It is also imperative that younger people are included in falls awareness campaigns, so that they are able to recognise and respond correctly when older people experience a fall.
- 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, audiologists and mental health practitioners.
- 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. Reablement services should be provided in partnership with third sector organisations which include social support as well as physical rehabilitation and home adaptations.
- The NHS in Wales must continue to offer free prescriptions to all users of the health service.

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