A Shared Journey: Evaluation of Welsh Government funding to Local Authorities to create Age-friendly Communities

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Introduction

Since 2021, the Welsh Government has provided dedicated funding to local authorities to support the development of age-friendly communities, in line with the vision set out in Age Friendly Wales: Our Strategy for an Ageing Society. This funding has enabled local authorities to appoint dedicated age-friendly officers (AFCOs), strengthen local partnerships and engage older people in shaping services and local communities.

This report evaluates the impact of this investment of £3.850,000 over 4 years, drawing on end-of-year reports from 2024 – 25, questionnaire responses from local authorities and insights from focus groups with older people facilitated by Age Cymru. By bringing together strategic and community perspectives, the report aims to identify good practice and next steps on our shared journey to become an age-friendly Wales.

The aims are:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of £50,000 awarded annually to each local authority to create age-friendly communities.

- To gain feedback from local authorities about their experience with administering the funding.

- To hear the voice of older people who are participating in activities generated by this award.

- To gather insights on each local authority's journey towards membership of the World Health Organisation's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.

Methodology

The research was conducted using the following three methods:

Evaluation of end year reports from Age-friendly Community Officers (AFCO)

As part of the funding agreement, each local authority is obliged to submit mid and end of year reports demonstrating how the grant is being employed to deliver the objectives set out in the funding criteria. End of year reports from 2024 – 25 were analysed for the purposes of this evaluation.

Local authority questionnaire

A questionnaire was circulated to each AFCO to gather a more detailed picture of the local authority experience in administering this funding. A copy of the questionnaire is available at Appendix 1 and was distributed in August 2025 with replies requested for 12 September 2025.

Focus groups with older people

To measure the impact of the funding on older people, we commissioned Age Cymru to hold focus groups with older people in each local authority participating in groups or forums funded via the age-friendly grant or supported by the AFCOs. (Summary of report available Appendix 2)

It is important to note that conversations did not focus solely on the impact of the funding, however the resulting report from Age Cymru provides a valuable insight into how older people are benefitting from community activities, what is working well and the barriers that prevent effective community engagement.

The report draws together feedback from groups of older people from across 20 of the 22 local authorities in Wales. It is structured around six key themes, representing the topic areas covered during the discussions.

Background

Age-friendly Wales: Our Strategy for an Ageing Society

The latest population predictions published by the Office for National Statistics state that people aged 65 years or older are projected to account for nearly a quarter (24%, or 806,000 people) of the total population in Wales in mid-2032. The number of people aged 75 years or older is projected to increase by 22% over the same period, from around 320,400 people in mid-2022 to around 391,300 people in mid-2032.

Age Friendly Wales: Our Strategy for an Ageing Society, published in 2021, sets out the action the Welsh Government is taking to prepare for the future. It considers the many things that influence how we grow older, like health and social care, transport and even the way we socialise, work and care for others. The Strategy focuses on the macro and the micro - the system-level changes that we are making, for example to our health and transport services, but also the smaller things that older people tell us make a difference to their daily lives such as variable access to GP appointments, hospital transport and the built environment. It aims to change the way we think and feel about ageing.

The Strategy for an Ageing Society was co-produced with older people and their representatives. Initial work was led by the Ministerial Advisory Forum on Ageing (MAFA) whose membership includes older people, academics and representatives of the third and public sectors. The Older People's Commissioner is also represented. To build on the work initiated by MAFA, we engaged over 1000 older people in a conversation about ageing and launched a public consultation.

Five working groups met three times between June and December 2018. Each group produced a report identifying the key areas where change is needed to improve lives for older people today and in the future. The working group reports formed the basis of a new Strategy for an Ageing Society and its final coproduced vision is:

- Our vision is an age-friendly Wales that supports people of all ages to live and age well.
- We want to create a Wales where everyone looks forward to growing older.
- A Wales where individuals can take responsibility for their own health and well-being whilst feeling confident that support will be available and easily accessible if needed.
- A Wales where ageism does not limit potential or affect the quality of services older people receive.

- Ultimately, we want to be a nation that celebrates age and, in line with the UN Principles for Older Persons, a nation that upholds the independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older people at all times.

<u>World Health Organisation's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities</u>

The global response to the world's ageing population has been a move towards age-friendly cities and communities. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that '*an age-friendly world enables people of all ages to actively participate in community activities and treats everyone with respect, regardless of their age.*'

The organisation's 2018 report <u>The Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities</u> elaborates:

> *By making cities and communities age-friendly, we ensure that cities and communities are inclusive and equitable places that leave no one behind – especially the most vulnerable older people. Equitable societies, in turn, have benefits for everyone.*

In 2010, WHO launched its Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities. To become a member of the Network, local leaders must commit to and implement the four steps:

- Engage with and understand stakeholders including older people;
- plan strategically to enable all stakeholders to develop a shared vision;
- implement an action plan; and
- measure the progress of the age-friendly approach as well as its impact on people's lives.

By funding local authorities to gain membership of this Network, and in doing so, to meet the above criteria, Welsh Government is helping to embed the <u>Well-being of Future Generations Act's Five Ways of Working</u> and a rights-based approach. Furthermore, by supporting older people to have a voice in shaping local communities and services, local authorities can broker new relationships with citizens and drive a cultural shift towards a more coproductive way of designing and delivering services.

<u>Funding to local authorities</u>

Since its launch in 2021, funding has been awarded to local authorities to support the realisation of the Strategy for an Ageing Society's vision to create an age friendly Wales. Funding of £550,000 - £25,000 to each local authority - was first allocated In October 2021 as part of Welsh Government's Covid-19 Recovery Fund. The funding criteria focussed on support for older people to re-engage with their communities and specified that this could be achieved via financial support for 50+ forums or older people's groups or through holding outreach events or engagement activity. In addition, the criteria asked local authorities to engage with older people and other stakeholders who have a role in creating an age-friendly Wales and to commence work towards gaining membership of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.

To enable local authorities to build on this work and deliver a new <u>Programme for Government</u> (PfG) commitment, a further £1.1million was allocated - £50,000 per

authority in 2022 – 23. The PfG committed Welsh Government to '*Fund a post in each local authority to champion an age-friendly Wales*' and subsequently the funding criteria was amended to:

- Ensure a dedicated post is in place within the local authority to champion and embed the work of becoming an age-friendly community.
- Continue to work towards membership of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.

£1.1million continued to be provided to local authorities in 2023 – 24 and 2024 -25 with the funding criteria remaining unchanged. However, following acknowledgement that activity in some areas did not fully align with the criteria, in 2025 - 26 it was amended to:

- A post to work with older people and stakeholders to create age-friendly communities.
- Meaningful engagement with a diverse group of older people.
- Enabling older people to take an active role in their community.
- Membership of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.

Overview of Age-friendly Communities Officers (AFCOs)

In order to understand how local authorities manage the AFCO posts, the questionnaire to local authorities asked the following three questions:

1. Which department in the local authority does your post sit in? Does this help you carry out your duties as an AFCO?
2. Do you have a job description? Does your job description mention working with other teams supporting older people?
3. How long have you been in post?

Responses show that AFCOs are situated in various departments within local authorities, with over 50% placed in adult social care or departments focussing on prevention and well-being. 27% sit within strategic or corporate departments with others placed in public services protection units or central posts with cross-cutting remits. Four local authorities adopt a blended approach with responsibility for age-friendly work dispersed across a range of local authority employees who are overseen by a senior council officer. In three of these areas, the role is shared with an officer employed in the third sector.

All but one respondent felt that their placement supported them to deliver their role effectively. For example, AFCOs placed in corporate or strategic teams felt able to embed age-friendly principles across council policies and planning frameworks whilst placement in community development or prevention teams helped to engage with grassroots organisations and improved access to local networks.

Many respondents highlighted preventative work (in line with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014) as central to their roles. Being part of social care/prevention teams mean AFCOs are part of the preventative agenda and are therefore able to promote independence, health and well-being to reduce reliance on acute services. Collaboration is a common theme referenced in the majority of

responses, with post holders working across organisational boundaries, whether internally (across departments) or externally (with partners and communities).

Many local authorities have leveraged their AFCO's placement to ensure the age-friendly agenda is not an "add-on" but rather embedded into policy, delivery and community development.

Challenges tend to arise where the role is isolated or overstretched with one AFCO struggling to deliver tasks not directly linked to their age-friendly remit.

Only 2 AFCOs do not have a job description. Of those shared with us, all reference either working with internal departments, external organisations and community groups. Many job descriptions explicitly mention coproduction, consultation and engagement with older people to shape services and strategies. Roles are often linked to broader strategic frameworks such as local well-being plans, Regional Partnership Boards and the WHO Age-friendly Domains.

Key tasks include:

- o Prepare reports and newsletters
- o Deliver presentations and training
- o Influence policy and service delivery
- o Promote good practice and innovation

Some roles include a focus on intergenerational participation, inclusive community development and safeguarding principles.

Most AFCOs have been in their current roles for between one and three years, with a notable cluster of appointments made in 2023 and 2024.

Despite this recent influx, a minority of individuals bring long-term experience to the role, with some having been involved in age-friendly or related work since 2014 or even earlier. These staff members often reference previous roles or continuous engagement in the field, providing valuable institutional memory and continuity, even as the majority of the workforce remains relatively new.

Career interruptions and transitions such as maternity leave, sickness, redeployment and secondments are common. While some local authorities manage these disruptions through interim support or flexible redistribution of responsibilities, this is not always possible.

Recruitment and retention have also presented significant challenges. Some posts have experienced high turnover or been vacant for extended periods, occasionally requiring staff from other roles to provide temporary cover. This instability has, in some cases, impacted the continuity and progress of age-friendly initiatives.

<u>Priority Outcomes Identified</u>

The questionnaire asked what outcomes local authorities were hoping to achieve at the start of the funding provision in 2022 (excluding the allocation during Covid-19) and what they had achieved to date. Across local authorities, the following aims were consistently identified at the outset of the funding provision:

1. Gaining membership of WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.
2. Establishing age-friendly structures and strengthening partnerships.
3. Amplifying older people's voices.
4. Coproduction - supporting the development of community projects.
5. Improving inclusion, accessibility and well-being.
6. Raising awareness and sharing information.

These outcomes align with the funding criteria outlined on page 4 and this report assesses the extent to which the funding has enabled local authorities to deliver these outcomes.

Outcome 1: Membership of the WHO Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities

At the time of writing this report, 11 local authorities have successfully gained membership of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities, however the majority of others have made significant strides in advancing age-friendly communities, supported by WHO Network membership application process and the Older People's Commissioner. (The Older People's Commissioner is an affiliate of the WHO Network and provides guidance and support to local authorities on their age-friendly journeys).

The experiences of current members and those progressing through the application progress reveal a range of tangible benefits, strategic impacts and opportunities for continuous improvement. Local authorities who have already gained membership of the WHO Network have noted substantial benefits. Most responses highlight networking and knowledge exchange (42%), credibility and recognition (32%), and policy and strategic impact (26%) as the top outcomes of WHO Network membership.

The most frequently cited benefits include:

- **Credibility and recognition:** Membership provides external validation by raising the profile of age-friendly work and encouraging wider partner engagement. Three local authorities state that membership has strengthened their reputation and influence locally and nationally.

- **Access to global best practice:** Members benefit from WHO resources, toolkits and case studies, as well as opportunities to learn from international peers. Some local authorities have leveraged these resources to inform their local strategies and drive innovation.

- **Networking and knowledge exchange:** Weekly webinars and peer calls, facilitated by the Centre for Ageing Better[1], offer ongoing learning and

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[1] The Centre for Ageing Better runs a peer support network for members of the WHO Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities

collaboration. The value of these connections in building capacity and sharing successful initiatives has been noted.

- **Strategic impact:** Membership has helped embed age-friendly principles into policy frameworks and decision-making processes, ensuring that age-friendly considerations are integrated across organisations.

- **Community engagement:** Being part of the network signals a strong commitment to age-friendly values, motivating local groups and citizens to participate and coproduce solutions.

- **Celebration and visibility:** Membership events and campaigns have elevated the age-friendly agenda, showcasing local achievements and inspiring further action.

- **Innovation and sharing:** Local projects such as connection cafés and walking groups are being shared globally to inspire others.

For authorities not yet members, the application process has been highly valuable and often transformative:

- **Structured framework:** The process is providing clarity on priorities and gaps across the WHO's eight domains, helping local authorities to assess their current provision and identify areas for improvement.

- **Catalyst for collaboration:** Application work has strengthened partnerships and coproduction with older people, fostering a culture of collaboration and shared vision.

- **Critical reflection:** Some local authorities have noted that the process has prompted critical reflection, sharpening priorities and clarifying objectives for becoming age-friendly.

- **Support and guidance:** The Older People's Commissioner's Office and WHO resources have been invaluable, offering guidance and support throughout the application journey.

- **Early impact:** Even before formal membership, the application journey has influenced policy and engagement strategies, acting as a catalyst for cultural change and strategic planning.

<u>Summary</u>

Whether through full membership or the application process, it is clear that engagement with the WHO Network has been a catalyst for positive change across local authorities. Membership brings credibility, global learning and strategic impact, while the application process encourages applicants to reflect, collaborate and make early improvements. Together, these pathways support the creation of inclusive, age-friendly communities and embed best practice across Wales.

Outcome 2: Establishing age-friendly structures and strengthening partnerships

The questionnaire responses and end of year reports illustrate how the age-friendly funding has enabled local authorities to improve internal collaboration across departments and build stronger external partnerships. This has led to more integrated planning, broader community engagement and tangible improvements for older people which are listed below.

Influencing local authority policy

Funding has allowed local authorities to embed age-friendly practices across their organisation - many have set up cross-department steering groups or internal networks that include representatives from a range of departments:

> *The funding has been invaluable in providing additional resource for a dedicated member of staff to lead on Age Friendly work. Having a central contact point has strengthened engagement with colleagues inside the organisation, ensuring Age Friendly principles are embedded across departments and linked into wider priorities. (Vale of Glamorgan)*

Newport formed an internal steering group with members covering each of the WHO's eight age-friendly domains, to support each service area to consider older people in its plans. In Gwynedd, the AFCO regularly meets with departmental heads and held workshops with all managers to brainstorm how each service can contribute to an age-friendly community. The outcome is that age-friendly principles are embedded into strategic documents and everyday operations. Several local authorities note that previously overlooked issues affecting older people in various departments are now being addressed because the AFCO attends internal meetings to raise older people's needs.

External partnership working

Externally, the funding has helped to create broader partnerships and networks. Many local authorities have created or expanded existing age-friendly networks or forums that bring together public sector partners, third-sector organisations and community groups. For example, Vale of Glamorgan set up an *Age Friendly Vale Network* comprising of a wide range of partners including the health sector, voluntary groups and older residents who come together under a common vision.

Other local authorities have built on existing partnerships. Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) integrated age-friendly objectives into its *Community Support Steering Group,* a pre-existing multi-agency body whose membership includes representatives from the police, health board, housing associations, Citizens Advice and more. By aligning the age-friendly agenda with this group, RCT ensured a partnership approach was adopted and integrated into practices locally which was instrumental in securing membership of the WHO Network.

Collaboration with the voluntary sector is another strong theme across all responses. Many local authorities work closely with their County Voluntary Council, some to distribute grant money to community-run projects and others fund Age Connects to coordinate older people's forums.

With the funding in place, local authorities and their partners have also been able to co-host events, campaigns and projects that benefit older people. Several areas held information fairs, community or ageing well events which bought together a variety of

organisations from different sectors to provide health checks and advice directly to residents, improving access for those who might not travel.

Networking and training sessions for stakeholders were noted as valuable:

> *The funding has facilitated networking sessions that have been invaluable in raising awareness of Age Friendly Communities, helping stakeholders visualise their part of the journey. (Wrexham)*

Such sessions can enhance mutual learning and cooperation. Joint campaigns and projects have also been launched thanks to these partnerships. For example, Cardiff developed unique initiatives in collaboration with Public Health Wales, such as an Age-friendly Cardiff website, an older adult condom distribution scheme (promoting sexual health) and a targeted vaccination awareness campaign which used animations and bus-stop ads to reach minority communities. These initiatives were possible by linking with health authorities and using additional funds leveraged via the age-friendly programme.

Ynys Môn collaborated with local schools and arts groups to bring dance programmes into care homes, enriching the lives of care home residents and children alike.

<u>Summary</u>

It is clear the funding has been a catalyst for local authorities to transform their approach to supporting older people. The common recipe for success has been to invest in coordination (people and partnerships) rather than just discrete projects. By doing so, local authorities have unlocked the capacity of both their own staff and external stakeholders to work together in new ways. The recurring result is more cohesive planning and delivery of services for older adults, greater inclusion of older people's voices, and numerous collaborative initiatives – from very practical service improvements to creative community programmes.

Outcome 3: Amplifying Older People's Voices

> *Having an officer in this role supports partnership working and supports ongoing work to address the Preventions Agenda… Without the officer, the coordinated voice of the older person would be more of a challenge to hear. (Pembrokeshire)*

A key ambition of creating an age-friendly Wales is to increase opportunities for older people to have a voice in the design and delivery of local services. Although the extent to which older people wish to be involved in coproducing and running services may vary, it is vital that local authorities make efforts to hear the views of as many older people as possible to ensure communities are truly responsive to the needs of Wales' ageing population.

We asked local authorities how many local older residents were engaged via in-person and virtual meetings, consultations, leaflets, newsletters circulated etc as a result of the funding. We requested separate figures for in-person and virtual engagement to cover the twelve month period – April 2024 – March 25. Some authorities gave precise figures, others provided narrative descriptions or combined totals and two described extensive engagement work without numerical data.

Therefore, these figures are not an accurate picture of engagement across all 22 local authorities.

The figures that were provided are detailed in the chart below.

Total Engagement across Wales by Method (Apr 24 – Mar 25)
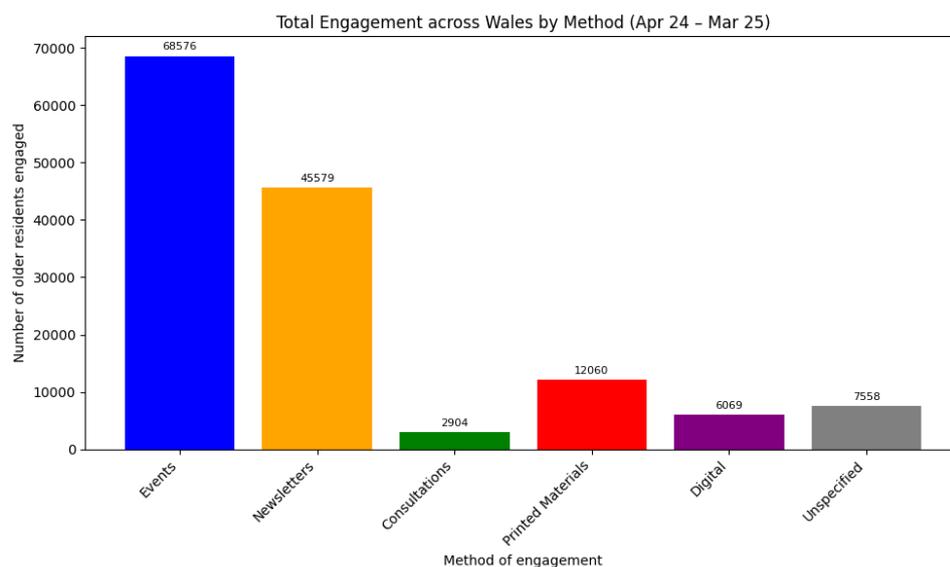
The methods of engagement in the above chart refer to the following:

- **Events** - forums, fairs, coffee mornings and other in-person gatherings.
- **Newsletters** - printed and emailed editions distributed to older residents.
- **Consultations** - survey responses and feedback sessions.
- **Printed Materials** - leaflets, guides and directories not classed as newsletters.
- **Digital Outreach** - virtual meetings, WhatsApp groups and website interactions.

These figures can be used as a guide to assess the reach and types of engagement local authorities are adopting. However, respondents were keen to highlight this method's limitations. For example, it is difficult to collate accurate figures:

> *This (figure) does not include social media engagements and reach, or number of listeners to the Forum's radio channel (not currently available). We believe that the figure is far higher than detailed …. but are beginning to record engagement more accurately moving forward.*

> *It's difficult to capture accurate numbers when engagement happens informally or through drop-ins – not everyone signs in or wants to be counted.*

Also, quantifying meaningful engagement can be problematic:

> *We can estimate reach, but it's not always possible to quantify meaningful engagement – numbers don't tell the full story.*

The extent of 'double counting' has also not been factored into the final figures.

> *Some older people attend multiple events or groups, so it's hard to avoid double-counting without a formal registration system.*

In an environment where public sector is often criticised for engaging via digital means only, it is pleasing to note that in person engagement is much higher at 48% compared with digital engagement at 4%.

We also asked local authorities how they gather feedback and how it is acted on to ensure engagement is meaningful, as set out in the funding criteria. Responses show that across Wales, local authorities are employing a wide range of methods to ensure older people's voices are heard and reflected in local planning, service delivery and policy development.

Feedback is gathered through both formal and informal channels. Most authorities use surveys—both digital and paper-based—to reach a broad audience, often supported by social media campaigns and printed materials in community venues. As referenced above, face-to-face engagement remains a key practice, with officers attending forums, community groups and events to speak directly with older residents. Many areas have established or continue to support 50+ forums or age-friendly networks.

A recurring outcome is that older people's opinions are directly influencing policy and services. Since the beginning of the funding programme, many local authorities have either established or strengthened older people's forums and advisory groups. For instance, RCT's *Older Persons Advisory Group (OPAG)* feeds into its age-friendly work and is linked with five local 50+ forums that have existed since 2004 – these ensure older residents have a say in shaping the local agenda.

Torfaen supports three independent 50+ forums that meet monthly; the AFCO attends and brings issues raised (e.g., a dangerous road junction or public transport concern) to the relevant department or arranges for local authority officials to attend the forums. This has led to quick, concrete fixes, for example, Torfaen's Highways Department painted double-yellow lines to improve safety outside a community centre after forum members voiced concerns.

In Newport, older residents were engaged through surveys (with the help of a citizen panel) and invited to participate in *participatory budgeting* exercises, helping decide on local funding priorities.

All local authorities aim to adopt inclusive approaches. Monmouthshire, for example, undertook extensive outreach by visiting over 30 groups at varied times of day to meet older people where they already gather:

> *As part of gathering evidence for our baseline assessment for our application to submit to the W.H.O Global Network of Age-Friendly Communities and Cities, I completed a 6-week survey across Monmouthshire. I went to 30+ in-person groups, meeting the 50+ population where they already meet…. I attended leisure centres at 6am in the morning, went to WI meetings in the evening, wherever people could be found, I took this opportunity to meet with the 50+ population. (Monmouthshire).*

Newport has made significant efforts to engage ethnic minority communities, using interpreters and working with trusted local organisations to overcome language barriers. Swansea uses a WhatsApp group with over 750 members to share information and gather feedback through polls, while Caerphilly and others use social media and email to maintain regular contact.

Acting on feedback is varied but often well-integrated into strategic planning. In many areas, feedback informs age-friendly action plans, policy frameworks and service design:

Through regular meetings, workshops, events, surveys, and community outreach, we collect feedback directly from older residents and partners. This insight is embedded into the Age Friendly Vale Strategy and Action Plan to shape future priorities and used to inform the Forum's forward work plan, event themes and workstreams. It is also shared with partners and Council departments to influence services and decision-making. (Vale of Glamorgan)

Local authorities have embedded older people's views into cabinet-level commitments and commissioning processes. Others have used feedback to secure funding and develop targeted services, such as community transport initiatives:

I created a survey focusing on transport provision. Based on the responses and discussions, I identify relevant partners to address the issues raised. This approach ensures that the feedback is acted upon effectively, leading to tangible improvements in services and support for older residents. (Neath Port Talbot)

Several authorities have established formal mechanisms to monitor and report progress. Vale of Glamorgan publishes regular updates to the Public Services Board and Scrutiny Committees, while Powys maintains an issue log that feeds directly into regional partnership planning. Newport and Blaenau Gwent have prioritised closing the feedback loop by revisiting groups to share outcomes and maintain trust.

This engagement is central to the age-friendly communities' approach and is helping shape more inclusive and responsive public services, however the responses also identify opportunities for improvement**.** For example, while engagement is strong, not all areas consistently report back to older people, particularly older people who are digitally excluded. Some authorities face challenges due to geography or limited funding, which can restrict the scale of engagement. There is scope to strengthen digital inclusion efforts while maintaining accessible offline options and to improve coordination across departments and partners to ensure feedback leads to joined-up action. These concerns were also raised by older people who took part in Age Cymru's focus groups and are detailed below.

It is clear that all local authorities embrace the principle of "nothing for older people without older people." They use methods ranging from surveys and forums to informal chats at coffee mornings to ensure older adults guide the agenda. Rural isolation and transport are universal concerns, addressed by bringing activities closer to people or using creative solutions. Many innovative projects have blossomed from listening to older residents – demonstrating a strong culture of coproduction and respect for older people's contributions across Wales. The examples shared show how older people are not just participants but active leaders and co-creators of age-friendly initiatives. (See outcome 4)

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<u>Feedback from older people's focus groups – voice and influence</u>

Age Cymru found that older people's experiences of voice and influence in Wales are mixed. While some benefit from structured forums, such as the 50+ Forum in Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan, (referenced above) which provide opportunities to share views and shape local priorities, others feel engagement is tokenistic or inaccessible. Consultations that rely heavily on online platforms

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exclude those without digital skills or internet access, creating barriers for many older residents.

A recurring theme was the lack of awareness about local representation. Many participants admitted they do not know who their councillors are or how to contact them, reinforcing a sense of distance from decision-making. This disconnect is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where isolation and limited communication channels make engagement even harder.

There is a clear appetite for more direct, meaningful communication and representation. Participants called for inclusive consultation methods, visible councillor presence in communities and proactive outreach, through newsletters, local meetings and offline channels, to ensure older people's voices are heard.

Summary

Across Wales, local authorities are working hard to make sure older people have a say in shaping the services and policies that affect their lives. From coffee mornings and community forums to surveys and social media, councils are using a mix of approaches to reach people and listen to their views. In-person engagement remains strong and many areas have introduced innovative ideas such as WhatsApp groups, participatory budgeting and targeted outreach to ethnic minority communities. These efforts are helping to turn feedback into action, whether that's improving transport links, influencing age-friendly strategies or creating new opportunities for older people to get involved.

While there is still work to do—such as tackling digital exclusion and ensuring feedback reaches everyone—the commitment to the principle of "nothing for older people without older people" is clear.

Despite these efforts, older people participating in Age Cymru focus groups have mixed experiences, with some benefiting from structured forums such as the 50+ Forums in Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan, others feel engagement is tokenistic or inaccessible. Many are unaware of who their local councillors are or how to contact them, which increases feelings of disconnection from decision-making, especially in rural areas. Participants expressed a clear desire for more meaningful communication, including inclusive consultation methods, visible councillor presence and proactive outreach through offline and community-based channels.

Outcome 4: Coproduction - supporting the development of community projects

All local authorities stated they involve older people in designing activities and groups. The dominant approach is coproduction; many local authorities note that older people often initiate and lead groups themselves, with the local authority's role to support, facilitate or remove barriers.

Nearly every local authority referenced partnership working with community groups, charities (Age Cymru, Age Connects or local voluntary councils), health services or community connectors – to engage older people. Several local authorities explicitly see their role as *enablers* rather than direct providers, supporting community-led initiatives, helping groups secure funding or resources and connecting older people

with relevant services. This often means leveraging existing social capital, for example, helping a local volunteer set up a new club, or linking an interest group with a service provider.

One AFCO commented:

> They [older community members] just need the support that the funding allows me to do and on a more personal note, it enables me to give sincere encouragement and most importantly (sometimes too often forgotten) recognition for their accomplishments. They tell me often they couldn't do it without me – the secret is, I'm enabling and empowering them, they are doing it really themselves, they're the lead, not me. (Flintshire)

The responses include numerous examples of creative initiatives shaped by older people's voices which are included in Appendix 3

Feedback from Age Cymru focus groups – volunteering

Volunteering plays a vital role in the lives of many older people across Wales, offering not only practical support to communities but also significant personal benefits. Participants described volunteering as deeply rewarding, providing purpose, social connection and a sense of pride. For some, it eased the transition into retirement or helped combat loneliness, while others valued the opportunity to "give something back" through roles such as charity shop work, gardening projects, befriending and cultural activities.

However, volunteering is not without challenges. Awareness of opportunities is inconsistent and many older people feel roles are geared toward younger volunteers. Physical limitations, health concerns and transport difficulties often restrict involvement, leading some to step back after years of service. Others expressed a preference for flexible, informal volunteering, such as helping within their own groups or neighbourhoods, rather than committing to structured roles.

Where volunteering thrives, it is closely tied to strong local networks and visible support which highlight the importance of proactive communication, accessible information and sustainable funding. Yet concerns remain about volunteer recruitment and succession planning, with many groups dependent on a small number of dedicated individuals.

Overall, volunteering is highly valued but faces pressures that risk its long-term sustainability. Addressing barriers through better promotion, flexible opportunities and investment in community-led initiatives will be essential to ensure older people can continue contributing meaningfully and benefiting from the sense of purpose and connection that volunteering brings.

Support for older people's groups to apply for funding

Many AFCOs support older people's groups to apply for grants by co-writing bids, reviewing applications or providing formal letters of support. In Ynys Môn, the AFCO drew on a background in fundraising to assist a *Nifty 60s* group to prepare a successful grant bid for £50,000, which allowed the group to expand into new communities. In Newport, the AFCO supplied a letter of support that helped a

community theatre group for over-50s win Arts Council funding, enabling them to run drama sessions in an older persons' housing complex.

Swansea credits its Ageing Well team with empowering an independent elders' forum to secure its own funding to run outings and classes.

In Torfaen, the AFCO helped a newly formed veterans breakfast club grow into a thriving weekly hub by securing National Lottery and a Welsh Government FUSION arts grant to provide music and art therapy sessions for the veterans. The AFCO also helped to secure a Warm Hub grant via the local community connectors which provided free breakfast rolls and food hampers for vulnerable older people. With the officer's guidance, the veterans' group has now become a constituted organisation – meaning they can apply for future funding on their own, although the officer still advises and links them to new opportunities.

Several AFCOs are on call to help fill out forms or advise individuals and clubs on how to meet funders' requirements. For example, Flintshire's officer said:

> *I've been able to access several streams of funding and supported individuals and groups with applications.*

Bridgend's officer worked closely with local volunteers to enable over ten new community organisations to set up and successfully obtain grants.

This kind of direct mentorship and practical assistance ensures that good projects are not held back by paperwork or lack of expertise and additional funding is accessed for age-friendly initiatives.

Raising awareness of funding streams

A core strategy is to make sure every older people's group knows what funding is available and how to get it. AFCOs act as information hubs, monitoring grant announcements and raising awareness through newsletters, forums, email bulletins, social media, and local networks. In Blaenau Gwent, the AFCO took a very proactive approach to develop direct (face to face) contact with local groups and personally raise awareness of grants like Warm & Safe Spaces. This ensured that groups who might otherwise miss online adverts heard about the funding and applied. As a result, numerous lunch clubs, hobby groups and coffee mornings across Blaenau Gwent received small grants they would not otherwise have known about.

Several local authorities also held funding workshops or networking events to introduce community groups to funders. Through such signposting and outreach, older people's organisations are kept informed and connected – for example, Swansea's team shares funding news at every Ageing Well network meeting and via community noticeboards, WhatsApp groups and an e-news bulletin. This indirect support helps groups help themselves, by ensuring they don't miss chances to secure money.

Setting up small grants schemes

Other areas have established dedicated grant schemes or simplified processes to help older people's projects get off the ground. Ceredigion launched an *Age-Friendly Ceredigion Grant* offering £500 grants that community groups could easily apply for – in its first round in late 2024, 19 organisations, from local hall committees to seniors' clubs received funding for events or accessibility improvements. Blaenau

Gwent Council applied for and managed a *Welsh Government Loneliness and Social Isolation Grant,* then re-granted that money to older people's groups. These micro-grants, coordinated by the AFCO, enabled dozens of volunteer-led groups to run activities to tackle loneliness. Notably, following this infusion of support, the percentage of local adults feeling lonely dropped from 16% to 11% in one year.

Channelling funding into older people's projects

Several local authorities also utilise participatory budgeting processes or community grant programmes to channel funds to older people's initiatives - Monmouthshire and Newport both held events where older residents and groups pitched ideas and won funding votes for their projects.

Removing barriers

Where local authorities are not funding groups directly, they focus on removing obstacles – as one AFCO observed, many older people's groups don't require funding, they require practical assistance with removing red tape.

In other words, AFCOs help to cut through bureaucracy (such as securing free meeting spaces, insurance, or transport) so that volunteer groups can operate more easily. This kind of structural support – whether simplifying a license procedure or providing a small start-up grant – often makes the crucial difference to establishing a project and ensuring its sustainability.

In Monmouthshire, by cutting through "red tape", the AFCO enabled a dementia café to be established in a council hub and reallocated community safety funds to install better lighting and benches for older people in town, without significant new funding.

Partnerships and collaborative networks

Underpinning all these efforts is a strong emphasis on partnership working. Partnerships encompass national programmes, with several AFCOs sitting on Regional Partnership Boards to ensure older people's priorities are represented. This has helped to secure funding to benefit older residents. Denbighshire managed to secure funding for a regional transport post focussing on older people's transport needs. Pembrokeshire formed a partnership with the local health board and third sector to run *Keeping Well* roadshows funded by via the Regional Integration Fund and worked with a university to attract grant money for dementia-friendly training.

Several local authorities launched new posts or schemes. For example, Swansea used external funding to hire an Ageing Well Involvement Worker to support more groups and Pembrokeshire partnered on a grant to place a dedicated Dementia-friendly Communities Connector in the voluntary sector.

Summary

The outcomes listed above illustrate how an AFCO role can act as a catalyst to support communities to unlock external funds, start new services and even change ways of working so that older people have more opportunities to establish groups and activities that matter to them.

Responses show that local authorities leverage every partnership – from small local charities to Welsh Government programmes – to direct resources into older adults'

initiatives. These multi-agency links also mean groups get practical help beyond money (advice, training, volunteers), further boosting their capacity.

Despite these positive initiatives, common challenges and barriers to engagement were noted. For example, rural older people without access to cars or public transport can struggle to participate.

Funding constraints are also limiting local authorities' ability to coproduce services - several highlighted that their age-friendly or 50+ programmes have no dedicated budget for activities as funding is limited to the AFCO's post. This means they rely on creative use of partnerships and external grants.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact was mentioned– some older people's groups in rural areas ceased and haven't resumed, making it harder to re-engage those residents. Keeping activities going long-term in volunteer-led models can also be difficult, and there's an ongoing task of encouraging new participation and leadership to replace those lost groups.

Older people participating in an Age Cymru focus group described volunteering as deeply rewarding, bringing purpose, social connection, confidence and a strong sense of pride. Many spoke about how volunteering enriched their lives — easing the transition into retirement, helping to combat loneliness and offering meaningful ways to contribute through activities such as charity shop work, gardening projects, befriending and cultural roles. However, despite these benefits, barriers such as limited awareness of opportunities, unsuitable roles, health concerns and transport difficulties can restrict involvement or push people towards more flexible, informal volunteering.

Outcome 5: Improving inclusion, accessibility and well-being

Local authorities recognise that older people are a diverse group with varied backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Intersectionality is at the forefront of many approaches as local authorities are increasingly attentive to how age intersects with other factors like disability, ethnicity, gender, language and socio-economic status.

There is a widespread understanding that an older person's experience is shaped not just by age but by these overlapping identities and circumstances. This understanding is influencing how services are designed and delivered to promote inclusivity and accessibility. Training, policy development and cross-departmental collaboration are supporting efforts to ensure that diversity and inclusion are central to service delivery.

To improve inclusion and accessibility, AFCOs are making sure engagement events and services are accessible to those with mobility or sensory impairments; providing information in Welsh and multiple languages and acknowledging cultural or religious contexts. One common example is the emphasis on digital inclusion: while digital technology can connect people, many older adults (especially the very old or those in rural and deprived areas) are digitally excluded, so AFCOs are ensuring that offline alternatives are always available. This includes traditional communication channels like community noticeboards, local radio broadcasts, printed newsletters, and face-to-face outreach. Such measures are crucial so that older people who are not online can still access information and participate fully.

Another important intersectional aspect is engaging with minority ethnic groups among older populations, such as LGBTQ+ elders or those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. Responses mention targeted outreach – for example, dedicated social or support sessions for older LGBTQ+ residents or working with specific cultural community groups – to ensure these individuals feel included and have services suited to their needs.

There is also an effort to address language needs for communities where older members might not speak English confidently by using translators or bilingual staff and recognising the importance of the Welsh language for many older Welsh speakers to feel respected and understood.

Some local authorities highlight that what works for active 70-year-olds might not suit those in their 50s who are juggling work, or those over 80 with greater frailty, so they adapt activities and consultation times accordingly. AFCOs are experimenting with new outreach methods. These include informal community meetups (for example, inviting people for a coffee and chat in a local venue rather than a formal meeting) and collaborating with employers, libraries or health services to connect with those who don't attend typical community events.

Shared challenges emerge in local authority work to widen inclusion and improve accessibility. One commonly cited difficulty is engaging with "hard-to-reach" older individuals – often those who are not already engaged in community groups or services. Many older people who live alone or lack social networks might not see themselves as needing support, or they may be reluctant to join activities they perceive as "for old people."

Combatting social isolation is a related challenge that many responses highlight. Local authorities find that older people who are part of clubs, forums, or networks tend to stay better informed, active and socially connected, whereas those outside such networks are at higher risk of loneliness and not knowing what support is available. To address this, several local authorities are fostering peer networks and Ageing Well groups that bring together people from different walks of life – unpaid carers, people with dementia, older disabled people –to ensure a wide spectrum of older voices are heard.

Innovative practices are emerging as local authorities learn from each other and from feedback. A key innovation is the multifaceted communication strategy already mentioned, which blends digital and non-digital outreach. Many local authorities provide information about activities and services not only on websites or social media, but also via community radio shows, local newspapers, flyers in public places and even digital display screens in town centres and bus stops – all aimed at reaching older people through whatever medium they are most comfortable with.

Another innovation is the creation of specialised programmes or sessions to welcome under-represented groups: for example, some areas run regular meetups specifically for older people from minority communities or interest-based groups such as older men's sheds and women's groups, to encourage participation across gender lines. There are also examples of intergenerational projects and volunteering opportunities open to all ages, which help older people engage in their community alongside younger people, thereby reinforcing the message that older people are an integral part of a diverse society, not isolated or separate.

A majority of councils acknowledged different needs in rural and urban areas. For example, rural communities face challenges like poor transport links and greater risk of isolation, so local authorities respond with outreach, local venues and mobile or village-based services. In contrast, urban areas usually have better access to facilities and larger networks, making it easier to run central events and a wider variety of activities—though even in towns, some older people prefer nearby "doorstep" activities. The goal is to ensure equitable access: bringing services to rural villages when needed, while leveraging infrastructure in urban centres.

Feedback from Age Cymru focus groups

Age Cymru asked participants whether they have a choice of activities in which to take part and about ease of participation.

Across Wales, older people's ability to participate in community activities is shaped by a complex interplay of transport, accessibility, cost and communication. While many areas offer a reasonable choice of activities, from exercise classes and arts sessions to informal social groups, the reality of accessing these opportunities often depends on geography, mobility and available support.

Transport remains the most significant barrier, particularly in rural counties where public services are limited and unreliable. Reduced bus timetables, long travel times and high taxi costs leave many older people dependent on lifts from family or volunteer schemes. Community transport initiatives exist but face persistent challenges: shortages of volunteer drivers, restrictive booking systems and limited coverage. For those without private vehicles, these gaps can mean complete exclusion from social life.

Physical accessibility compounds these difficulties. Poor pavement conditions, misaligned dropped curbs and inadequate public toilets undermine confidence and independence, especially for those using mobility aids. Even where venues are accessible, the journey to reach them often is not.

Cost and financial pressures also influence participation. While many local sessions are free or low-cost, trips and specialist activities can be prohibitively expensive, particularly where grant funding is absent and costs fall on participants. This creates inequity between those who can afford to travel or pay for classes and those on fixed incomes.

Digital exclusion and communication gaps remain critical issues. Increasing reliance on online platforms for advertising activities and transport information leaves non-digital users at a disadvantage. Offline communication, through leaflets, posters and noticeboards, is inconsistent and word of mouth, while helpful, cannot reach isolated individuals. Calls for better outreach and visible information in community spaces were common across counties.

Despite these barriers, older people expressed a strong desire for greater choice and inclusivity. While urban areas often provide diverse opportunities, rural communities rely heavily on self-organised groups and informal networks. Community hubs were praised for reducing loneliness and building confidence, but their future depends on sustained funding and local commitment.

Finally, geographic inequalities were evident. Participants perceived investment as favouring urban and southern regions, while rural and northern areas struggle with

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transport, digital access and venue sustainability. Concerns were raised that large-scale facilities often receive priority over smaller local spaces, risking further isolation for those in remote communities.

Summary

Local authorities across Wales are working to make communities more inclusive and accessible for all older people. They recognise that age intersects with factors such as disability, ethnicity, language, and socio-economic status, and are adapting services accordingly. Efforts include providing information in multiple languages, ensuring venues are accessible and offering both digital and offline options so no one is excluded. Local authorities are also reaching out to under-represented groups, tackling social isolation and tailoring activities to suit different needs and lifestyles. Innovative approaches—such as community-based meetups, intergenerational projects and blended communication strategies—are helping to create welcoming spaces where older people can connect, contribute and thrive. These actions reflect a shared commitment to equity and well-being, ensuring that every older person has the opportunity to participate fully in community life.

The picture is one of resilience and resourcefulness, but also of persistent structural challenges. Addressing transport gaps, improving physical and digital accessibility, supporting volunteers and ensuring affordable, varied activities are essential steps toward creating inclusive, age-friendly communities where older people can remain active, connected, and valued.

Older people participating in an Age Cymru focus group mirrored the comments from local authorities regarding barriers to participation. They reported that while many areas offer a reasonable choice of social, creative and physical activities, their ability to take part is heavily shaped by transport, accessibility, cost and communication barriers. Transport difficulties — particularly in rural areas with limited public services, long travel times and costly alternatives — often leave those without private vehicles excluded from community life and physical barriers such as unsafe pavements and inaccessible routes further undermine independence. Financial pressures, inconsistent offline communication and widespread digital exclusion also restrict participation, though community hubs and locally organised groups were praised for reducing loneliness and offering inclusive spaces where people feel connected and supported.

Outcome 6: Raising awareness and sharing information

> *The funding has enabled the development of a city-wide network of information delivery for older people… extending citizen touchpoints to ensure they are included. (Cardiff)*

All of the outcomes listed above include elements of local authorities raising awareness and sharing information with older people about how to access support to live and age well.

Local authorities across Wales have worked hard to raise awareness and share information with older people about how to access support and live well. Under the Age-friendly Communities Grant, councils have adopted a wide range of

communication methods to reach as many people as possible, recognising that no single approach works for everyone.

Face-to-face engagement remains the most popular and valued method. Local events, forums and informal gatherings give older people the chance to hear updates, ask questions and share concerns directly with officers. These personal interactions help build trust and ensure that information is delivered in a way that feels accessible and friendly. Local authorities often achieve a broad reach through well-attended local events, which also provide opportunities for social connection.

Alongside this, many authorities produce newsletters—both printed and emailed—packed with news, upcoming activities and useful resources. Leaflets, guides and directories are also widely distributed in community venues such as libraries, GP surgeries and council offices, ensuring information is easy to find for those who prefer traditional formats. These printed materials remain essential for older people who are not online or who value having something tangible to refer to.

Digital channels play an increasingly important role, especially for those who are digitally connected. Local authorities share updates through websites, social media, and email, and some have introduced virtual meetings or WhatsApp groups to keep conversations going. These tools allow information to be shared quickly and help maintain engagement when in-person meetings are not possible. A few areas have even explored creative options like community radio or door-to-door visits, making sure information reaches people who might otherwise miss out.

This blended approach—combining traditional and modern methods—reflects a clear commitment to inclusion and accessibility. By tailoring communication to different preferences and circumstances, local authorities are ensuring that older people across Wales have the information they need to stay connected, informed, and supported. These efforts are not just about sharing updates—they are about building trust, reducing isolation and empowering older people to take an active role in their communities.

Feedback from Age Cymru focus groups – access to information

Word of mouth and libraries remain the most trusted sources, offering reassurance and personal contact. While platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp help some stay connected, many older people are not online or lack confidence using digital tools, leaving them excluded when information is primarily shared through these channels.

Participants consistently called for printed newsletters, physical noticeboards and proactive outreach to ensure inclusivity. They also highlighted the need for clearer signposting not only to activities but also to services, rights and opportunities, so that older people can navigate what is available without relying on chance encounters or complex online searches.

While some local authorities demonstrate good practice through forums, hubs, and Age-friendly champions, many older people feel information is too hidden, too digital and too dependent on personal networks. Awareness of rights and elected representatives is patchy, and digital exclusion leaves many disconnected from essential services. Improving communication through consistent, accessible, and

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Summary

Local authorities across Wales are using a mix of traditional and digital methods to raise awareness and share information with older people under the Age-friendly Communities Grant. Face-to-face events remain the most valued approach, complemented by printed newsletters, leaflets and guides to reach those who are not online. Digital channels such as websites, social media, virtual meetings and WhatsApp groups help extend reach, while some local authorities use creative options like community radio and door-to-door visits. This blended approach reflects a strong commitment to inclusion and accessibility, ensuring older people stay informed, connected, and supported.

However, feedback from Age Cymru focus groups highlights ongoing challenges. Many older people still rely on word of mouth and libraries and digital exclusion leaves some disconnected from essential services. Participants called for clearer signposting, printed materials and proactive outreach to make information easier to find. While good practice exists, older people felt communication is often inconsistent and too reliant on online platforms or personal networks. Improving multi-channel communication is critical to ensure older people remain engaged and empowered in their communities.

IMPACT

What has worked well and how the has funding improved older people's well-being?

We asked AFCOs to highlight what has worked well and how their posts have improved well-being for older people. AFCOs identified several approaches that have worked well which included:

Flexible, locally tailored approaches

To improve the well-being of older people, AFCOs stressed the need for flexible, locally tailored approaches that respond to the unique needs of each community. This adaptability has enabled them to reach a wide range of older people, including those who are often underrepresented or harder to engage.

Face to face engagement

Face-to-face engagement has been key to building trust and understanding local needs and responses highlighted that older residents feel more valued, heard and involved when actively engaged in shaping their communities.

Creating opportunities for older people to socialise

A core focus has been creating opportunities for older people to socialise, stay active and support each other. These initiatives have helped thousands of older people build new friendships and feel less alone. Many of these activities are supported by older volunteers themselves, who AFCOs say play a vital role in sustaining community connections and fostering a sense of purpose and contribution.

Partnership working

Strong partnerships with health, third sector, and community organisations have enabled more joined-up support and access to funding. Age-friendly principles are now embedded in many local strategies, helping to challenge ageism and promote inclusive services.

Creating more accessible environments and services

Improvements to public spaces, community hubs and digital access have made environments more welcoming and accessible. Enhanced communication—through newsletters, outreach events and digital platforms—has empowered older people to access services and opportunities.

Leadership

AFCOs also note that visible leadership—both within councils and across partnerships—has been essential in driving momentum, securing buy-in, and embedding age-friendly thinking across services.

How has your work improved well-being?

In the questionnaire responses, AFCOs evidenced improvements in older people's well-being via personal stories of how initiatives changed their lives including older people who had felt lonely gaining friends and confidence; older unpaid carers receiving much-needed support and community members feeling proud to

contribute. Such feedback, along with improved participation rates and increased volunteer involvement, underscores the real difference these roles have made. (See Appendix 3).

The AFCOs observe that older residents are more socially connected, more emotionally supported and increasingly active and empowered in their communities. While each area's approach has been tailored to local needs – from city-wide programmes to village coffee mornings – common themes have emerged in how older people's lives have improved:

Stronger Social Connections and Reduced Loneliness (Connected to others)

 Many older people have formed new friendships and support networks through community activities which gives participants a regular reason to get out of the house and someone to talk to. In both urban centres and rural villages, older residents who once felt lonely now describe feeling part of a community. Across Wales, such social connections are contributing to a warmer, more inclusive community life for older people.

Improved Emotional Well-being and Confidence (Heard and respected)

 AFCOs state that feeling valued and heard has had a powerful effect on older people's mental and emotional health. Because AFCOs have made a point to involve older adults in decision-making – through forums, advisory boards, and surveys – older people feel their opinions matter. This inclusion has boosted self-esteem and reassurance. Many AFCOs report seeing older individuals become more confident to speak up, volunteer, or try new activities.

Better Physical Health and Active Lifestyles (Healthier and more active)

AFCOs observed that more older people are engaging in gentle exercise and wellness activities, leading to physical health benefits. As a result, many older adults are staying active and taking preventative steps for their health. Older people report improved mobility, balance and energy from regular exercise sessions, along with the enjoyment of doing these activities in a social setting. In addition to exercise, initiatives such as hearing test clinics at community centres or falls-prevention workshops mean that older people are getting health checks and advice in convenient settings. While long-term health metrics (like reduced hospital admissions) are harder to measure at this stage, AFCOs believe these efforts are helping older individuals maintain their physical health and independence longer.

Supported in accessing services

Importantly, information about services and benefits is now reaching more people. Through newsletters, drop-in advice sessions, and collaborations with support agencies, older people (including those who are not online) are learning about transport options, social clubs, financial entitlements and help available in their area. This has led to tangible outcomes, such as older unpaid carers accessing grants; older people getting help with home adaptations and finding local transport or befriending services that they hadn't known about before. AFCOs note that when older people receive the support they need – whether a minor housing repair or just knowing whom to call for advice – it greatly reduces worry and helps them feel safer and more in control of their lives.

Greater Empowerment and Community Involvement (Able to participate meaningfully)

A striking outcome mentioned across different local authorities is that older people feel more empowered and have a stronger voice in their communities. The age-friendly approach treats older residents as partners and leaders, not just service users. As a result, many have taken on new roles – from sitting on age-friendly strategy groups to volunteering at events or leading peer support activities. This kind of involvement has given older individuals a sense of purpose and achievement. AFCOs observe that when older people see their ideas implemented, they feel a greater ownership of local developments. This empowerment contributes to mental well-being, as people feel their later years are meaningful and their contributions acknowledged.

Better access to community spaces (feeling safer)

Across Wales, physical and social environments have been made more inclusive for older people. AFCOs have worked to improve community infrastructure – from setting up more benches, public toilets and hearing loops in public venues, to supporting "warm welcome" hubs in winter and accessible community gardens. They often collaborate with planning and transport teams to address barriers like poor pavements or lack of bus shelters. At the same time, they encourage intergenerational understanding through events (such as shared reading programs and school partnership projects) that bring younger and older people together. These efforts help older adults feel safer and more comfortable participating in community life and they promote respect and cooperation between generations.

Feedback from Age Cymru focus groups - impact, benefits and enjoyment

Age Cymru asked participants to explain what they like about their activities and what difference have they made to them. Across all areas, participants consistently described these activities as lifelines that provide social connection, purpose and improved well-being.

Many said that without these opportunities, they would be "watching TV," "sitting at home doing nothing," or feeling "lost." Instead, these groups offer a sense of belonging and friendship, with people often meeting outside organised sessions and supporting one another in practical ways, such as helping with banking or checking in on those who seem unwell.

Social interaction emerged as the most valued benefit. People spoke about the joy of "having a chat," "meeting people from all walks of life," and "laughing together." For those living alone or caring for a partner with dementia, these sessions break the cycle of isolation and provide emotional support from others who understand their experiences. Several participants described the groups as "family," saying they now have friendships they never expected to form.

Mental health improvements were a recurring theme. Individuals reported feeling happier, less anxious, and more motivated. One person said, "I'm usually miserable and crying, but when I come here, I've got a big smile on my face." Others highlighted how activities "take our minds off our problems," including financial worries and help maintain cognitive health: "It keeps your brain active" and "helps your memory."

Physical health benefits were also noted. Activities such as Tai Chi and gentle exercise classes improve balance, coordination and mobility, reducing pain and increasing confidence. Participants linked these benefits to preventative health outcomes, emphasising that staying active and social reduces the risk of decline and costly health interventions.

Purpose and structure matter. Many said these sessions give them "something to look forward to" and "a reason to get up," creating routine and meaning in their week. For some, volunteering adds an extra layer of fulfilment, combining social engagement with helping others.

Inclusivity and accessibility were highlighted as essential. People valued welcoming environments where age and ability do not matter and where unpaid carers can continue attending even after their caring role ends. However, concerns remain about cost, transport, and digital barriers, which can limit access for some.

In short, these activities are far more than leisure; they are critical to well-being, independence and community cohesion. They combat loneliness, support mental and physical health and foster resilience among older people. As one participant summed up:

"This is my life now. If I won the lottery, I'd donate millions because I don't want this to close, ever."

Feedback from older people on the impact of AFCOs

While participants were not directly asked about these roles, many referenced them spontaneously, highlighting their importance in connecting individuals with activities, information and support.

In areas where coordinators were visible and active, they were highly valued. Participants described them as "the most important person coming here" and said, "Without her we would be lost" and "She's worth every penny." These coordinators were known by name, regularly attended local groups, shared updates and advocated for older people's needs. Their presence fostered trust and encouraged participation, with one person noting, "We all find out about things through [the coordinator]. She works really hard."

However, awareness and engagement varied significantly. In several areas, participants had little or no knowledge of a coordinator or confused their role with other support staff. Some relied instead on volunteers or self-organised groups, with one participant commenting, "I don't see anything from the council – I hear things from [the coordinator] and we talk about things here. I wouldn't know where else to go to find out anything really."

Where coordinators provided administrative support, their contribution was especially appreciated. One forum member shared, "Things are easier for us now that we've got an Age Friendly officer to help with the admin and things," while another added, "She managed to re-connect all of the stakeholders… and she's made new connections as well."

The findings suggest that proactive, well-supported coordinators can have a transformative impact. To strengthen their role, the report recommends improving

> visibility and clarity of coordinator roles, enhancing outreach through regular community presence and accessible communication, providing administrative support to volunteer-led groups and ensuring consistent engagement across all regions.

Summary

In summary, age-friendly initiatives throughout Wales have fostered a significant uplift in older people's overall well-being – socially, emotionally and physically. The Age Cymru focus groups show that the activities are more than leisure—they are lifelines that combat loneliness, boost mental and physical health and give older people purpose and connection. From friendship and emotional support to improved mobility and confidence, these groups help people feel happier, less isolated and more resilient. They create routine, offer volunteering opportunities and foster inclusive spaces where everyone feels welcome. Despite barriers like cost and transport, participants say these activities are vital to living and ageing well: "This is my life now—I don't want this to close, ever."

Coordinators play a vital role in connecting older people with activities, information and support. Where they are visible and active, participants described them as indispensable—trusted figures who attend local groups, share updates and advocate for older people's needs. Their presence fosters engagement and makes administration easier for volunteer-led forums. However, awareness of these roles varies, with some areas lacking visibility or clarity, leaving older people reliant on volunteers or informal networks. (It should be noted here, that although AFCOs may not be visible in some areas, they may still be supporting volunteering and informal networks to flourish or working strategically to improve services and local environments).

The Impact of Ringfenced Age-friendly Communities Funding

Age-friendly Communities Officers state that ringfenced funding for age-friendly communities has been instrumental in enabling local authorities across Wales to embed age-friendly principles into policy and practice. It has supported the creation of dedicated posts to act as champions for older people, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs reflected in local decision-making. These roles provide strategic leadership, coordinate cross-sector partnerships, and drive forward preventative work that helps older people stay connected, independent and well.

The funding has also enabled meaningful community engagement through forums, surveys and events such as Older Persons Week and Age Without Limits Day. It has supported the production of accessible information, including printed newsletters and non-digital resources, ensuring older people remain informed and included.

Crucially, it is suggested that the ringfencing of this funding has protected its purpose and impact. Without it, the respondents suggest that age-friendly work could be diluted, deprioritised, or absorbed into broader budgets — undermining years of progress and risking the loss of trust among older communities.

As one local authority respondent put it:

> *Without a coordinator, it would be very unlikely that all the older people's fora would be able to continue… It would be heartbreaking to see all the progress grinding to a halt.*

Another warned:

> *Older people begin to feel valued, supported then everything stops and they fade into the background.*

And the strategic risk is expressed as:

> *Without this funding it would be extremely challenging to continue with the work on the ageing well policy and achieve / maintain the age friendly status.*

Respondents consider that ringfenced funding is not just a financial mechanism — it is a commitment to older people's rights, well-being and inclusion. Without it, they are concerned that the infrastructure, momentum and trust that underpin age-friendly Communities would be at risk. (It should be noted here that opinions on whether the age-friendly funding should remain ringfenced or form part of the Revenue Support Grant[2] may differ within local authorities. The above remarks are from the age-friendly post holders and managers only).

Challenges

Local authorities across Wales have identified a range of challenges in delivering and sustaining age-friendly community initiatives. These challenges reflect operational, structural and contextual barriers that affect implementation and long-term planning.

Short-term and uncertain funding

Many local authorities have reported that short-term funding cycles limit their ability to plan strategically. Funding is often confirmed late in the financial year, which delays recruitment, programme development and delivery. This uncertainty has also affected the ability to secure long-term partnerships and maintain continuity in community engagement.

Capacity constraints

In most areas, a single officer is responsible for coordinating age-friendly work, often alongside other duties. This has limited the scope and scale of delivery. AFCOs reported difficulties in managing multiple priorities, maintaining stakeholder relationships and evaluating impact. One response states:

> *Grant money paying towards the salary of an officer with no additional funding for activities and events creates uncertainty about the focus.*

In some cases, AFCOs have had to rely on volunteers or external partners to deliver activities, which can be inconsistent or unsustainable.

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[2] The Revenue Support Grant is funding from Welsh Government to local authorities to deliver essential services.

Digital exclusion

Digital exclusion remains a significant barrier to engagement. Older people without access to devices, internet connectivity, or digital skills are at risk of being excluded from services and information. One AFCO commented:

> *Many older residents….have said they do not want to be online, are fearful of the internet and possibly falling victim to a scam, lack access to devices due to the cost or not having the confidence and skills to navigate digital platforms.*

Some local authorities have introduced digital training and support, but uptake varies and in-person alternatives remain essential.

Geographical and transport challenges

Rurality and poor transport infrastructure have made it difficult to reach older people in remote or coastal areas. These challenges affect both service delivery and engaging with 'harder to reach' older people is challenging. Older people may be isolated in rural and coastal villages, have poor Wi-Fi connectivity or lack the digital skills or interest to connect or engage online.

Some local authorities have attempted to address this through mobile outreach or localised events, but these approaches require additional resources.

Duplication and lack of coordination

In some areas, similar initiatives (e.g. dementia-friendly and age-friendly programmes) are being delivered separately, leading to duplication of effort. This can result in fragmented delivery and reduced impact. Officers have suggested that a more coordinated approach across departments and partner organisations could improve efficiency and clarity.

Misunderstanding of age-friendly membership

Membership of the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities has sometimes been misunderstood locally. In some cases, the focus has shifted to achieving or maintaining the status rather than implementing the associated principles. This has led to confusion about the purpose and expectations of age-friendly work and may have limited meaningful engagement with communities.

Inconsistent recognition and branding

Age-friendly work is not always clearly identified or communicated. Events and initiatives may not be explicitly labelled as part of the age-friendly agenda, which affects visibility and public understanding. AFCOs have reported that this can lead to missed opportunities for recognition and support, both internally and externally.

Challenges in reaching underrepresented groups

Local authorities have reported difficulties in engaging with certain groups, including older men, individuals living alone and those not actively seeking support. These groups may be less likely to participate in community activities or respond to consultations. Cultural attitudes, stigma around ageing and limited awareness of available services have also been identified as barriers.

<u>Lack of clear guidance and role clarity</u>

AFCOs have expressed a need for clearer guidance on the scope and expectations of age-friendly roles. There is variation in how roles are defined and implemented across local authorities, which can lead to inconsistencies in delivery. Standardised frameworks, shared resources and examples of best practice have been identified as potential actions to improve consistency and confidence in delivery.

Conclusion

Over the past three years, local authorities across Wales have made a significant and tangible difference to the well-being of older people through a combination of direct engagement, partnership working and strategic influence.

The age-friendly funding has supported the employment of AFCOs who act as trusted connectors and advocates for older people. These officers lead engagement, influence local authority policy development and delivery, organise community events and ensure older people's voices shape local services and policies. Without these posts, local authorities tell us that the networks and partnerships built over years would unravel and the momentum behind age-friendly work would be lost.

Whether through full membership or the application process, it is clear that engagement with the WHO Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities has been a catalyst for positive change across local authorities. Membership brings credibility, global learning and strategic impact, while the application process encourages applicants to reflect, collaborate and make early improvements. Together, these pathways support the creation of inclusive, age-friendly communities and embed best practice across Wales.

The funding also underpins practical initiatives such as printed newsletters, outreach events and local forums – vital for reaching those who are digitally excluded or living in rural areas. It enables local authorities to celebrate older people's contributions, improve accessibility and deliver preventative work that reduces isolation and pressure on statutory services.

Questionnaire responses say continuing to ringfence this funding is essential as it guarantees continuity, protects resources from competing priorities and allows long-term planning rather than short-term fixes. Respondents consider that dedicated funding signals a genuine commitment to older people, builds trust and ensures that age-friendly work remains a priority rather than being diluted or absorbed into wider budgets. Without it, many respondents warn that progress would cease, leaving older people more isolated and less able to influence decisions that affect their lives.

AFCOs across Wales have been catalysts for change, working both at the grassroots level and within strategic arenas to improve older people's lives. This collective progress over the last three years demonstrates the value of dedicated age-friendly initiatives, highlighting common achievements (empowered voices, stronger communities, responsive services) while allowing each local area to address its unique challenges and opportunities in supporting an ageing population.

While the overall direction of travel is positive, the older people's focus groups identified important challenges that temper this progress. Barriers such as transport, rural isolation, digital exclusion and limited awareness of available services were cited. Notably, these same issues were also acknowledged by local authorities in

their reports and questionnaires, demonstrating a shared understanding of the structural and practical obstacles that can limit participation. For example, both local authorities and older people highlighted the need for improved transport options, more accessible information (particularly for those not online) and sustained support for volunteer-led groups.

The contrast lies not in disagreement over the issues, but in the experience of their impact. While local authorities are working to address these barriers through strategic planning and partnership, older people's day-to-day experiences suggest that more needs to be done to ensure these efforts are reaching everyone, particularly those who are most isolated or digitally excluded.

It is also clear that some local authorities are employing the funding to achieve its specified outcomes better than others. This can be evidenced by the number of local authorities who have successfully gained membership of the WHO Network, but also by our analysis of end of year reports which show some local authorities are hindered by competing priorities, issues with staffing or strategic level support.

Despite these challenges, the commitment to age-friendly work remains strong. Across Wales, teams are listening to older people, promoting intergenerational understanding, celebrating diversity, advocating for sustainable funding and bringing a range of partners together to work towards a shared vision of an age-friendly Wales.

Next Steps

- Funding for AFCO posts for the next financial year (2026-27) has been agreed by the Minister for Children and Social Care. Early notification of funding was announced via a written statement to celebrate Older People's Day.

- Funding decisions in relation to 2027-28 onwards will be considered by the 2026-30 administration

- The Welsh Government will continue to share and encourage best practice via the Age-friendly Network and quarterly newsletter.

- In partnership with the Older People's Commissioner, the Welsh Government will encourage local authorities who have not yet gained membership of the WHO Network to submit an application.

- The Welsh Government will share this evaluation with the Local Authority Age-friendly Network, the Ministerial Advisory Forum on Ageing (MAFA), the Older People's Commissioner and relevant officials from across Welsh Government to consider cross-cutting issues raised relating to digital exclusion, transport, volunteering and accessibility of services and public spaces. This working group will also consider how to expand awareness of age-friendly communities to more strategic bodies across Wales.

- Learning from the findings of this evaluation, we will establish a working group of older people, MAFA members, local authorities and other interested parties to focus on engagement and how to reach underrepresented groups.

- We will work with partners listed above to consider the value of the following:
    - Clearer funding criteria for local authorities in 2026 -27.

- o Improved visibility and branding for age-friendly initiative to increase awareness.

- o A standardised framework for AFCO roles, including clear remit and outcomes.

- We will fund Age Cymru to work with One Voice Wales to encourage more Town and Community Councils to be part of creating an age-friendly Wales.

- The Welsh Government will engage local authorities in a programme of work linked to challenging ageism.