

Shaping Future Support | The Health and Disability Green Paper

Written evidence submitted by Care & Repair Cymru: October 2021

Introduction to Care & Repair

1. Care & Repair Cymru is Wales' Older People's Housing Champion. Our aim is to ensure that all older people in Wales can live independently in safe, warm, accessible homes. We are the national body for Care & Repair in Wales, representing 13 independent agencies operating in every county offering a wide range of home improvement services, tailored to client's needs and local circumstances. Last year we supported over 47,000 older people across Wales, carried out over 17,000 adaptations in the home to help prevent trips and falls, whilst delivering £14.5 million's worth of repair and improvement work to improve the health, safety and warmth in people's homes¹.
2. Care & Repair works with older people in the private housing sector, owner occupiers and private tenants. A third of our clients live alone, a third have a disability and two thirds are over 74 years old.

Questions

Summary

1. What more could we do to improve reasonable adjustments to make sure that our services are accessible to disabled people?

Whether out of necessity or enjoyment, increasing numbers of older people are heading back into work. As such, employment support – as well as all other support offered by the DWP, including accessing of benefits and pension credit – needs to be available offline. Only 49% of people over 75 use the internet in Wales², so moving to an online-only format for benefits would be detrimental to many who are unable to access the online services due to cost or a lack of skills.

The flurry to move to digital during the Covid-19 pandemic has had serious ramifications for those not online in accessing their rights and services as citizens - this has been especially apparent in healthcare and benefits applications – and is something that must be addressed as an urgent priority going forwards if we are to have a Wales that is truly equal, cohesive and “the best place to grow old”. Not

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

² <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-09/internet-use-and-digital-skills-national-survey-wales-april-2018-march-2019-207.pdf> (p. 5)

everyone will want or be able to use digital technology and there will always be a need for human interaction with the DWP, and especially in the wake of rebuilding after the COVID-19 pandemic, there needs to be a greater focus on providing support that is available to everyone. House visits need to continue, and there need to be more community-based services from the DWP, especially for older people in more rural areas who may lack the means or be unable to travel to a larger town to access the help they need. Not all older people are able to rely on family or friends to help them in these circumstances.

Where services are offered online or over the phone, accessibility for people with sensory loss is essential. This is also key for in-person or community-based support, and arrangements will need to be made to ensure DWP employees are able to provide the necessary support to everyone who needs it.

Through our Managing Better service, we are increasingly and acutely aware of how difficult it is for people living with a sight or hearing loss to access mainstream services. Often understanding of sensory loss is homogenised to 'poor sighted' or 'hard of hearing', without understanding the implications from a range of sensory loss conditions. In terms of understanding Welfare Benefit entitlement it is important that specialist intermediaries like RNIB, RNID, SENSE, The British Deaf Association and DeafBlind UK, are considered in making proper assessment of entitlement.

2. What more information, advice or signposting is needed and how should this be provided?

The proposal outlines "improving information on GOV.UK", and "support through Help to Claim" as two means of advice or signposting. There is nothing explicit about offering this advice or signposting offline, however. The former is exclusively online, and the latter is still reeling from the pandemic and its website claiming that "some local Citizens Advice still can't give face to face advice"³. While this is somewhat understandable in the current health landscape, alternatives need to be made available immediately, especially in consideration of the loss of £20 per week for Universal Credit claimants.

This support, advice, and signposting cannot be exclusively online. As aforementioned, only 49% of older people over the age of 75 in Wales use the internet and would probably struggle to know these services were available to them, let alone access them. The shift to primarily online help and support will be detrimental to many.

Similar to our response to the previous question, in order to provide an equitable service for all UK citizens, including older people, more community and in-person help will need to be made available. This is especially true for older people in rural areas of Wales who may be unable to travel somewhere else to get the support they need.

Care and Repair agency caseworkers often note that they are the ones suggesting to clients that they could be claiming more benefits, and while Care and Repair agencies in Wales helped 43,913 older people in 2020-21⁴, many more went without help.

³ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/contact-us/help-to-claim/>

⁴ Care & Repair Cymru Annual Report, Forthcoming

Additionally, Care & Repair support is less widespread in England, so many older people would likely have gone without the support they needed, or without even knowing how to access services like the ones above. Once again, the need for more in-person support is clearly evident.

Western Bay Care & Repair works with Swansea Council and key third sector partners to encourage the take up of pension credit benefit. More information on the scheme can be found [here](#). Through a range of media, including newspaper adverts, this scheme has successfully encouraged new pension credit applications alongside new applications for other benefits. The scheme highlights the importance of using 'offline' media, which the DWP could produce and release itself to highlight available benefits to targeted audiences. The DWP could also work with Care & Repair agencies, local authorities, and other third sector partners to signpost its services in this way. Radio and TV adverts, flyers in GP surgeries, pharmacies, leisure centres, and other public places that have a high footfall of older people would all be good areas to start.

In spite of its successes, and the specialist casework support it deploys, Western Bay Care & Repair still finds difficulties with Pension Credit take-up, whether this is because there might be a cultural resistance or an over-emphasis on online promotion. It might be useful to approach the Commissioner for Older People, utilise Ageing Well and 50+ groups, the National Pensioners' Convention and Age Alliance Wales, to more actively promote take-up through active networks on the ground.

3. Do you agree with the principles we have set out for advocacy support?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Please tell us why below

We agree with the majority of the principles, in particular the aim to help people find information and provide practical support. As aforementioned, Care & Repair caseworkers have taken it upon themselves to help clients do this, so having that offer from the DWP may help streamline applications and ensure that older people can access the help they need. This advocacy support may also go some of the way to alleviating issues faced by the digital divide outlined in our response to the previous question, with the caveat that this advocacy support will also have to be available offline, and not exclusively online.

However, we disagree with the support not being available to everyone and "only offered to the people who need it most". This should not be the case. Just because a person has had previous help from a charity or other organisation such as Care & Repair agencies, that does not mean they should be ineligible for additional support.

What has been made clear from Care & Repair agencies' work and feedback, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, is that DWP employees were often unable to provide the necessary help and advice over the phone, with some caseworkers having to step in with applications and appeals processes to get their clients the help they needed. If advocacy support is going to work, extensive training and recruitment would be necessary.

On a final note, the Green Paper also outlines the DWP's desire to "also provide support to address wider issues in peoples' lives", such as access to health and care services. While the DWP should absolutely listen to its claimants and give a voice to the vulnerable, there may also be more opportunities to collaborate with third sector organisations like Care & Repair Cymru to ensure no voice goes unheard. Additionally, issues with accessing health and care services are due to decades of chronic underfunding, the increasing impact of digital access and pressures from the pandemic, and as such the DWP alone is unlikely to be able to offer additional support, so would benefit from coproduction partnerships with the Third Sector, where additional capacity and skills could be deployed. What will be important, however, is ensuring that those using advocacy support are aware of all the services available to them, including those outside of the State's remit, including Third Sector organisations.

4. How might we identify people who would benefit from advocacy?

This could be done in any number of ways, but most obvious is through their signpost and advice services: if someone uses one of the services outlined and the DWP or Citizen's Advice employee working with them believes they would benefit from it, then they could offer this service.

As aforementioned, closer work with Third Sector organisations would mean that they could refer clients to advocacy services offered by the DWP. This would mean creating new avenues of collaboration.

The alternative approach proposed in the Green Paper - putting out calls for those in need of advocacy support to make themselves known - might not as a sole strategy be the most effective approach. It is our experience that many people on benefits, and invariably older people, are unaware of the severity of the issues they face and continue to manage through unmanageable situations, without understanding the full implications on their lives. As such, this may not be the best way to reach out to those who would most benefit from advocacy.

5. What kinds of support do you think people would want and expect from advocacy?

It is unreasonable to believe that this advocacy service will solve all of a claimant's problems: issues with access to health and care services outlined in the Green Paper are endemic and caused by continued underfunding.

What could be offered, however, are more opportunities to talk to DWP representatives, such as civil servants, to get their voices heard. To some extent, the DWP has already started to do this with its Green Paper events, but these need to be more regularly timetabled and across the UK, including in rural areas. If these events do continue, however, they need to be held in-person as soon as it's safe to do so, and in a broad range of communities to ensure equitable access, so that these sessions are not just considered a box-ticking exercise. These sessions

must lead to actionable points but also monitored and drive improvement across the DWP and both UK and Welsh Governments.

The majority of people would probably derive most benefit from a help and advice service. The Green Paper mentions help with filling out forms which, when paired with advice and signposting services, should lead to better outcomes for many, assuming DWP employees have sufficient capacity and are trained to deal with these kinds of requests and identify areas in which a claimant could benefit from additional help.

6. Are we meeting disabled people's mobility needs? Please tell us why/why not.

- Yes**
- No**
- Partially**

Please provide any further detail in the text box below

Unsure.

Chapter 2 Questions: Improving Employment Support

7. What more could we do to further support employers to improve work opportunities for disabled people through Access to Work and Disability Confident?

N/a

8. How can we support people who have fallen out of work to identify and consider suitable alternative work before their Work Capability Assessment?

N/a

9. What further support or information would help work coaches to have more effective conversations with disabled people and people with health conditions?

N/a

10. What has been your experience of receiving employment support? What was good about the support? Are there further improvements that could be made?

N/a

11. How can we make the most of the knowledge and expertise of local organisations to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment?

As mentioned in responses to previous Chapter One questions, working closer with Third Sector organisations like Care & Repair Cymru would be beneficial to ensuring equitable access to the benefits system. Welsh Government has an excellent working relationship with such organisations, which it recognises and continues to grow and develop. Care & Repair Cymru already has an excellent relationship with Wales' Government and would welcome a similar relationship with the UK Government to drive legislative process with implications to the work of the DWP to ensure vulnerable older people are not left out of accessing the support they need.

12. What more could we do to work with other organisations and services, local authorities, health systems and the devolved administrations to provide employment support in health settings and join up local support?

Wales has unique issues compared to the other countries in the UK. With the oldest housing stock in Europe, older benefits claimants are often unable to undertake essential works on their homes and continue to live in poor conditions which can have detrimental effects on their health. The Welsh Housing Condition survey conducted in 2017-2018 revealed that 18% of older peoples' homes have Category 1 hazards present⁵. These hazards can lead to a number of physical health issues such as falls, respiratory illness, and increased risk of heart attacks or strokes, as well as mental health issues; many of which could be prevented or better managed by simple repairs⁶.

Additional support should be provided to these claimants, and UK Government and the DWP should work to identify problem cases and refer these to local authorities or third sector organisations such as Care & Repair so that they can get the help they need.

13. What can we offer that would encourage people in the Support Group or LCWRA to take up our employment support?

N/a

14. Would you be happy to access employment support digitally? Please tell us why/why not.

Yes

No

Please tell us why/why not

Many people would benefit from accessing support online but having this support online – even alongside other services such as advocacy support and signposting – would unfairly ostracise older people.

⁵ https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-02/181206-welsh-housing-conditions-survey-headline-report-2017-18-en_0.pdf (p. 10)

⁶ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Home-and-dry-report.pdf> (p. 4, p. 13)

15. What should we consider when developing a digital support offer for disabled people and people with health conditions?

Accessibility for everyone, including people with sensory loss, needs to be a key consideration. Care & Repair Cymru's *Managing Better* pilot shows the importance of this, and seeks to ensure that opportunities to seek equitable access to technology are maximised, assisting older people to continue to live independently at home.

16. How can we better support young disabled people who are moving out of education to find appropriate work?

Consider that education may happen at any age, so any support available for young disabled people should be available for people of all ages, especially those moving in to a new sector or after taking a break from work.

Chapter 3 Questions: Improving our Current Services

17. During the coronavirus pandemic we introduced assessments by telephone and video call as a temporary measure. In your view, in future, what mixture of methods should we use to conduct assessments?

As mentioned in previous responses, it is fine to continue to offer services online and over the phone. Where these services are conducted online or over the phone, steps need to be taken to ensure that DWP representatives are able to fully gauge the applicants' circumstances. Often, people – especially older people – may be too proud to explain the full extent of their circumstances or may not fully comprehend the severity of their situation. As such, DWP representatives should be trained to learn how to ask the right questions and where to explore more, to more comprehensively understand the real-life impact and therefore identify clients in need of help. Had this already been the case, fewer older people would have gone without help during the COVID-19 pandemic, as our agency community caseworkers have highlighted to us.

However, to ensure the DWP can help everyone necessary, these services also need to be offered offline as well.

18. How could we improve telephone and video assessments, making sure they are as accurate as possible?

Care & Repair caseworkers noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, DWP caseworkers were ill-equipped to deal with the shift to online working. Home visits stopped and were replaced with telephone calls in which DWP employees did not know the right questions to ask and were not trained properly to help people in the right way. Employees took older people's responses at face value, often to their detriment as they could not appreciate the seriousness of some of the issues they faced. This led to a number of older people not getting the help they needed during the pandemic. Additionally, caseworkers were left to "fill in the gaps" and apply for benefits such as pension credit on behalf of clients, as well as help with the appeals process where necessary and were able to. Experienced caseworkers have many skills which they employ to identify client need.

In addition, there have been reports that people's benefit entitlements have been reduced or revoked completely due to inaccurate telephone interviews. This is especially unfair

when considering the fact that many people on Universal Credit and/or other benefits are more likely to have had to shield because of health issues.

Proper training would also ensure that issues around assessment reports not always being accurate, resulting in unfair decisions as outlined in Chapter 3, would happen less.

19. What more could we do to reduce repeat assessments, where the impact of a person's health condition is unlikely to change significantly?

If a person's health condition is unlikely to improve, repeat assessments are unnecessary. These assessments cause undue stress for the claimant as well as unjust reductions or complete removal of their benefit entitlement. This is true for many older people and particularly with people that have regressive illness and are managing long-term conditions.

20. Decisions can be changed after an appeal has been lodged but before a tribunal hearing takes place. How can we improve the way we communicate a new decision in this situation?

N/a

21. What other changes could we make to improve decision making?

N/a

22. How could we improve the experience when people claiming Child DLA are invited to apply for PIP?

N/a

Chapter 4 Questions: Re-thinking Assessments to Support Better Outcomes

23. Is there anything about the current PIP activities and descriptors that should be changed?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

If yes, please state here what changes to the PIP activities and descriptors should we consider?

24. Is there anything about the current WCA activities and descriptors that should be changed?

- Yes
- No

Don't know

If yes, please state here what changes to the WCA activities and descriptors should we consider?

25. Should we seek evidence from other people, such as other health professionals or support organisations?

N/a

26. What type of evidence would be most useful for making WCA and PIP decisions, and should there be a standard way to collect it?

N/a

27. How could we make sure the evidence we collect before a WCA or PIP assessment directly relates to a person's ability to do certain things?

N/a

28. How could we improve assessments, or the specialist support available to assessors and decision-makers to better understand the impact of a person's condition on their ability to work or live independently?

N/a

29. How can we make it easier for people to inform us if their condition or circumstances have changed so that a review of entitlement can be carried out at the right time?

This service cannot be conducted exclusively online. More staff manning phone lines and a greater community presence would allow this, as well as ensure that people can access the help they need wherever they are.

30. What could be included in a discussion to develop a more personalised employment and health support plan?

N/a

31. What skills and experience should the person undertaking an employment and health discussion have?

N/a

Chapter 5 Questions: Exploring Ways to Improve the Design of the Benefit System

32. How could we simplify the system for people applying for multiple health and disability benefits?

There should be fewer repeat assessments: one assessment conducted fairly should suffice for a person to have the help they need.

33. Universal Credit (UC) has many features, such as the work allowance and taper, that aim to make it easier for people to move into work. How can we ensure that disabled people and people with health conditions are aware of these features, and encourage people to try out work on UC?

N/a

34. How could the current structure of benefits be changed to overcome people's financial concerns about moving towards employment?

N/a

35. How could the current structure of benefits be improved so people can better manage changes in benefit entitlement?

N/a

36. While continuing to focus financial support on people who need it most, how could we more effectively support disabled people with their extra costs and to live independently?

The Universal Credit uplift should be reinstated immediately. Its recent removal is unfair and removes over £1000 per year from millions of vulnerable people.

37. Should we explore options to make it easier for disabled people to access practical support such as aids, appliances or services, and why?

Yes. Access to these services would allow them to live more independently at home. This is especially true for older people.

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

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

Something as simple of voice recognition to turn on the lights can prevent falls, and thus prevent unscheduled hospital admissions amongst older people. We believe additional support and funding for pilots such as the Alexa project should be further explored as a way of working collaboratively cross-sector and cross-governmentally to meet concurrent priorities not just for the benefits system, but also for health, housing and wider digital access. It was clear from this project that there is scope for encouraging older people to go online, and once there for some simple everyday functions, there is scope to develop confidence around using internet services for financial inclusion, emergency shopping and access to healthcare advice. Care & Repair already has experience of using technology – both specifically with this Alexa Pilot – but also pan-Wales throughout our *Managing Better* service – and would be happy to provide any additional information on our work in this space.

38. What particular types of practical support should we help disabled people access?

N/a