

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2012

AMs took evidence from **the Older People's Commissioner for Wales (Sarah Rochira)** on her annual report 2011/12.

In her opening statement, **Ms Rochira** said from her first day in post, she had sought to be a strong champion and independent voice for older people who would "do her best" to give them back their voice. She said her annual report set out what her office had been doing over the past year and emphasised the impact it had had on "real people".

She went on to say there was much to be celebrated in Wales including a large population of older people however serious problems persisted including poverty, loneliness, isolation and health challenges. She noted the often derogatory language used to describe older people was a particular challenge.

She concluded that by "*getting it right for older people, we can get it right for everybody*".

**Lindsay Whittle (South Wales East)(PC)** asked for the Commissioner's opinion on comments made by Lord Bichard, suggesting older people should undertake work in retirement to earn their pension. **Ms Rochira** replied that she had issued a public response, condemning **Lord Bichard's** comments and added this was typical of media treatment of older people, who were often seen as a burden. **Lindsay Whittle** endorsed this view suggesting it would be very positive if Wales could send the message that older people were not a burden.

**Vaughan Gething (Cardiff South & Penarth)(Lab)** asked what sort of feedback the Commission had had regarding the possibility that people may have to sell their homes to meet care costs. **Sarah Rochira** said many older people were concerned that Dilnot had "stalled" as this created ongoing uncertainty. Many expressed the desire for fairness, noting they had paid into the system on the understanding that they would be supported. Change and uncertainty at this late stage was creating a "culture of fear". **Ms Rochira** noted that older people did not simply sit on their assets but often used them to grow the abilities of their families.

**Mick Antoniw (Pontypridd)(Lab)** focussed on resources. He asked how **the Commissioner** was ensuring the £1.8m budget and 25 staff of the Commissioner were being effectively used. In a follow up question, he was critical of publicly funded bodies that "produce endless glossy

reports and strategies". He suggested there was inadequate focus in the work plan on the impact of welfare reform on older people.

Responding, **Sarah Rochira** said when it came to resources; her focus was on ensuring the work of the Commission added value to the lives of older people. She gave the example of the Dignified Care? Report which had resulted in more dementia nurses and better ward management. She also set out how the Commission had directly supported over 700 older people in the last year. She confirmed that in the next year, the Commission would produce a reach and impact report to set out exactly how lives were being improved. She also noted that media coverage for the Commission had increased since she took office in June, making more people aware of its work and she had used her legal powers at tribunal for the first time in recent weeks.

She rejected **Mick Antoniw's** suggestion that her annual report was a "glossy report", stating that she had chosen the format to emphasise the importance of real older people. She added that she was committed to scrutinising the impact of welfare reform on older people and would be raising the issue with the **Secretary of State for Wales (David Jones)** next week.

**Rebecca Evans (Mid & West Wales)(Lab)** followed up on resources, asking if the reduced budget inhibited the Commissioner's work. **Ms Rochira** said her priorities were identifying areas where impact could be made then delivering these priorities. She confirmed she would look for efficiencies and could operate within the reduced budget for now, but after identifying her priorities, she may consider a request for additional budget but strongly emphasised that any such request would come with robust evidence on how additional spending would benefit older people.

**Elin Jones (Ceredigion)(PC)** asked what guidance had been issued by **the Older People's Commissioner** to public bodies on service change. She also asked how third sector organisations could help develop the services older people needed. **Sarah Rochira** confirmed that reorganisation of health, residential care and day centre services were all regular concerns heard on her inquiry line. She had written to Local Health Boards and Local Authorities stressing her expectation that older people were engaged in any service change, changes were to the betterment of older people and there was no disproportionate impact on them. She said she would review impact assessments to ensure that this was done and would not hesitate to challenge if it was not. She said "*due process was not a lot to ask*". On third sector involvement, she

acknowledged there was a role to play and a wide range of options should always be considered but more funding was always necessary.

**Lynne Neagle (Torfaen)(Lab)** sought updates on the progress of dignity in care and asked what was being done to support hard to reach older people and those concerned about the closure of sheltered accommodation. Responding, **Sarah Rochira** said on dignity in care she was satisfied that it was now a tier one priority for the NHS but her focus was on ensuring improved patient experience and there was no evidence of that after a year. She confirmed she had given the NHS 18 months to evidence positive change and she expected a progress report next March. She was clear that she would issue a clear 'pass or fail' verdict on the NHS. On engagement with older people, she noted both she and her team were undertaking an increased number of visits to both professional groups and more informal setting such as dementia cafes, carers groups and intergenerational lunches. She was also commissioning 'Voices of Older People' research to ensure the opinions she expressed reflected those of older people. Finally, on sheltered housing, she acknowledged this was an area she hadn't thought about much but was keen to discuss with **Ms Neagle**. She emphasised her desire to engage with all AMs, noting the more information she had, the stronger her work programme would be.

**Rebecca Evans (Mid & West Wales)(Lab)** asked how the Commission was supporting older carers. **Sarah Rochira** said this was a priority for her, relating a meeting with some carers who were very keen to support their loved ones but struggling without suitable support. She said her work in this area was in its early stages but would focus on the implementation of the carers' measure, training for carers and respite care. She added that she would not just support older carers but younger people who looked after older people too.

**Mark Drakeford (Cardiff West)(Lab)** concluded the session by asking **the Commissioner** for any final thoughts on the Committee's inquiry into residential care. He noted advocacy had been a major theme as, despite many people such as social workers and family who should be able to speak for older people's rights, voices were not always heard in the system. **Sarah Rochira** picked up on residential care. She said her focus would be on how people went into residential care, often in a rushed way. She said it was important to offer strong advocacy so people could make the right choice for them. She added that she would be publishing advice after Christmas for those considering a move from their own homes into residential care.

