



Older people – independence and well-being

The challenge for public services

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health, criminal justice and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

The challenge

- 1 We live in an ageing society. Most older people can now look forward to many more years of healthy life after retirement than ever before. At the same time, our society is becoming more diverse and expectations are changing. The shift in proportion, composition and attitudes of the older population has profound implications for public services. We need to take action now to shape things for the better.
- 2 Older people need an environment in which they can thrive and live life to the full for as long as possible. The challenge to communities and councils is to be inclusive, to help older people to stay healthy and active, and to treat them as full citizens and a resource to the community, rather than depending on it. For those whose health has begun to fail, they too deserve to enjoy life as fully as possible and we need to find new ways of providing support to them.
- 3 But because we often see older people as dependent and frail, rather than as citizens with a broad range of concerns, and with a contribution to make, we restrict our response to them. Services for older people are often focused on a narrow range of intensive services that support only the most vulnerable in times of crisis. In fact, at any one time, only about 15 per cent of older people are in immediate touch with care services: meanwhile the vast majority receives little attention.
- 4 We need to see a fundamental shift if we are to meet the aspirations of older people. We need to stop thinking in terms of dependence and deficit and start thinking about independence and well-being. When they are asked, older people are clear about what independence means to them and what factors help them to maintain it. These factors, which are outlined below, go far beyond care services to involve issues such as transport, housing, education, leisure and advice.
- 5 This briefing, together with the series of reports that support it, sets out what older people need in order to live independent lives, and describes the response that will be required from public services, government departments and regulators. It draws on research, policy analysis and, very importantly, the views of older people in making a case for change which should not be resisted.

A changing approach

- 6 Older people have strong and consistent views on what helps them to stay independent. At the heart of older people's sense of independence and well-being lies their capacity to make choices and to exercise control over how they live their lives. Interdependence is a central component of older people's well-being; to contribute to the life of the community and for that contribution to be valued and recognised.
- 7 There are a number of factors that contribute to a sense of independence and well-being. These are having a safe comfortable home, being close to friends and

amenities in a safe neighbourhood, being able to take part in social activities, keeping busy, getting out and about and using transport, paying for new expenses, knowing how to find the way around the system and having good access to health services and to advice on how to stay healthy.

- 8 Older people want ageism to be tackled, to be involved in making decisions about the questions that affect their lives, and they also want services delivered not as isolated elements, but as joined-up provision which recognises the collective impact of public services on people's lives.

Building a strategic approach

- 9 A number of councils are already using their community leadership role, working with older people and partners such as the NHS, Pensions Service, voluntary organisations and others, to improve the lives of their older citizens. Although some councils are taking imaginative action in order to meet the challenges of the future, for most, there is a long way to go.

An agenda for successful achievement

- 10 The improvements in service delivery and policy formulation which this report proposes will be far reaching in their impact. They will lead to the better use of public money and, most importantly, impact on the quality of life and well-being of older people. The agenda for action for central government, local authorities, the NHS and other agencies is challenging but deliverable. It demands new ways of working, new ways of organising services and new ways of involving older people. The implications of an ageing society are not yet fully clear – but the duty of community leadership clearly requires building richer and more vibrant communities in which older people play their full part as citizens.

Key areas and responsibilities for action:

- 11 **Public services** should plan immediately to put in place the building blocks to ensure the independence and well-being of older people:
- (a) **Engagement with older people** should be strategic, comprehensive and designed to reach all groups of older people, including those whose voices are seldom heard.
 - (b) There should be a clear and shared understanding of the **make up of the local population** of older people and of future trends.
 - (c) Older people's needs and aspirations should be addressed through a deliberate **strategic approach** that makes it clear what improvement in the lives of older people it is seeking to achieve, goes beyond care services, and has explicit links with the community strategy.

- (d) The importance of the older people's agenda should be reflected in the **commitment and leadership** of a local council.
- (e) Older people's needs and aspirations should be addressed through **whole system and partnership working** within an area, with the commitment of all partner agencies reflected in their individual strategies, priorities and services.
- (f) A **comprehensive range of care services** should be in place, including proactive services that support older people before the point of crisis and assistive technology.
- (g) **Support for carers** should be closely linked with the strategy for older people in an area.
- (h) Good quality **information, signposting and advice** on the services and opportunities that are available should be on hand to older people and their carers, with older people playing a central role in the design, delivery and development of area communications and information strategies across all agencies.
- (i) The **performance and impact** of local services should be informed by active evaluation and direct involvement of older people.

12 Government and its departments can play a major part in changing the climate and support public services in improving their approach to older people and the way in which ageing and older people are viewed locally through providing stronger leadership.

- (a) **Attitudes to ageing and older people** should be reviewed and changed.
- (b) **Policy development and leadership** should be coherent and decisive and at a national level to address the needs of older people.

13 The Audit Commission will work with others to support this process:

- We will ensure the recommendations of this report are reflected in our contributions to the continuing review of the implementation of the NSF for older people.
- We will build on the NSF review and incorporate the expectations and criteria for successful performance of councils into the CPA for 2005 onwards and our frameworks for service inspections of housing, environment and culture.
- We will work with partners such as the Improvement and Development Agency to help support communities that are adopting a broad strategic approach and to spread learning more widely.
- We will work to strengthen partnerships between regulators and develop streamlined approaches that look at whole systems and multi-service provision for older people.

• Copies of this report are available at:

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