

# Speech by Ruth Marks, Older People's Commissioner for Wales to Opan / SPARC Conference Swansea 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2008

Bore Da, good morning.

Thank you very much for inviting me here today. I am delighted to be amongst such a varied and interesting conference and look forward to both renewing some contacts and making new ones during the course of the day.

What I aim to do in this presentation is to give an insight into the Older People's Commission and my independent role in speaking up for older people across Wales.

The Act that constituted my office is the Commissioner for Older People Wales Act 2006 - however, as the title of this session suggests - putting older people first - I think that Older People's Commissioner is a far better title - it puts older people first - which is a fundamental part of my role - and the way in which I hope to work with many of you in the future.

This morning, I'm going to cover 3 main areas:-

Firstly, my role and powers

Secondly, what has happened since I took up post in April

Thirdly, outline my vision for the Older People's Commission.

Before I start I'd like to tell you about the first official meeting I held with older people when I came into post.

I wanted to involve older people in the early development of the Commission. The task was to design a logo and strap line. I met with members of the University of the 3rd Age at the University of Glamorgan. They gave me lots of useful ideas and contacts which have led to a very successful competition with 40 entries being judged this week. One of the U3A members said to me at the end of our meeting "You don't know how much it means to us that you have sought out our opinions, you are listening to them and also that you have come to see us." I found that to be a very salutary message.

I'll now give you an overview of my role and powers.

My role was established by legislation in 2006, The Commissioner for Older People Wales Act. It is a cause for celebration that we are living longer and healthier lives and I am delighted that Wales is leading the way by establishing the Commission for Older People.

There are 4 main responsibilities set out by the Commissioner for Older People Wales Act. These are:

- To promote awareness of the interests of older people in Wales and of the need to safeguard those interests
- To encourage best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales
- Keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law affecting the interests of older people in Wales
- To challenge age discrimination

My legal powers enable me to scrutinise and challenge a range of public bodies including local authorities and health bodies.

Another way of putting this into context is that I need to be aware of the following:

Information, advice, advocacy and support

Complaints and whistle blowing

And develop an independent scrutiny role to promote dignity and respect.

I'm sure you'll agree this is an extensive remit - and one that cannot be achieved by working in isolation.

All of us attending this conference have shared aims of excellent service, user involvement, protection of vulnerable adults and working in the most effective ways possible, and that has to mean together.

As Commissioner I see my role as having 3 key priorities:

Firstly – To **listen** to older people

Secondly – To be an effective voice for change to improve the quality of older people's lives

Finally – To take action by using my powers to promote & protect the interests of older people.

I will provide just and robust challenge to public bodies to do better by older people.

**I'll now move to my second point – what has happened since I took up post.**

I took up the post of Older People's Commissioner for Wales on 21<sup>st</sup> April - so this is week 14 and I will soon be talking in terms of months.

On day one I arrived with a small set-up team to a temporary office that had a few desks, telephones and chairs. No computers, no stationery and at that point no money!

That has changed slightly and we now have a bank account and some funds, an IT system, temporary offices in Aberystwyth and Cardiff and have commissioned legal services.

Waiting for me were over 400 pieces of communication sent by people and organisations across Wales before I took up post. Quite an achievement as I didn't have an address at the time!

These letters contained everything from requests to speak at conferences - such as this one - to the most worrying descriptions of treatment of older people.

In that first week I wrote to key stakeholders.

I wanted to set out straight away an outline of my responsibilities and how I might be contacted.

In order to achieve this I have to listen to older people right across Wales. My work programme - the priorities that I will put in place - will be determined by what older people tell me.

This process has already started.

During June and July I have held 3 consultation meetings in Llandudno, Flint and Swansea. I attended the National Old Age Pensioners convention in Port Talbot and an Elder Abuse event in Llandrindod Wells.

I have made contact with existing older people's structures. I will liaise with Local Authority Older People's Champions, Strategy Coordinators, local forums as well as the National Partnership Forum for Older People in Wales.

At the moment, dignity and respect, the standards of care and how older people are treated by those in authority are key messages I am hearing.

Themes of poverty, health and social care, housing and transport are mentioned most frequently.

### **Moving to my third and final theme – my vision for the future.**

Communication and building effective relationships will be a constant feature of my approach.

Older people in Wales lobbied for the office of a Commissioner.

Organisations in Wales such as Age Concern, Help the Aged and Care & Repair also campaigned for this independent role.

Older people need to access information, use services and engage in activities across the full range of civic society.

There is rightly a focus on health and social services but this should not distract any of us from engaging with older people on issues across housing, transport, leisure, education, planning – indeed every policy and service area.

Everyone here today has a powerful role to encourage other colleagues across your organisations in Wales and the UK to work with older people to ensure their voices are heard.

I'm convinced that the issues that are brought to my attention by older people will be heard most effectively if they are part of a wide Welsh debate both here in Wales and in the UK.

I'd like to pose 3 questions

Why?

How?

When?

Why should we put older people first and involve them in our research, our policy and service development and evaluation?

Because it is the right thing to do? Certainly. But also because it will give us better information - Qualitative and quantitative data.

We need more definitive Welsh data to share with policy and decision makers in Wales.

We also need to work collaboratively with colleagues across the UK - especially where we need to collate social and economic data to influence debates on issues that are not devolved to Wales.

I believe this will be particularly important around the future funding of care and the issues of working age and pensions.

How can we do this?

By communicating and networking.

Communicate with older people - listening, talking and networking across all our different sectors and areas of expertise.

We also need to ensure that those who design and develop services know about the latest and planned research.

I applaud the role of OPAN and SPARC in this regard.

From today's packs I've already spotted a range of information that I want to follow up on subjects including health, housing and employment.

Just one for example is the work on vision and how it impacts on driving.

There is a link between this work and the announcement of the new Single Equality Bill which seeks to ban age discrimination.

There are many examples in the service industry of discrimination against individuals on the basis of age. Surely car insurance costs should be based on an individual's record. If you've been driving without incidence for 40 years why should your premiums suddenly increase because of your age?

This is being hotly challenged by business - especially the insurance industry. It is vital that we are able to use research data, personal experience and develop positive messages to counteract the negative stereotypes often portrayed in the media.

Older people want to speak up for themselves.

Many have found their voice in groups or forums, but others are not engaged in any such activity.

Many older people want to and are able to work, volunteer, or play active roles as grandparents or caring for other relatives.

Others are isolated, disabled, frail, vulnerable and lonely.

We need to make sure we are communicating with older people who have a voice and those whose voice is often not heard.

The message that I'm getting loud and clear is "involve us - don't ignore us."

The final question was when - and my answer to this is - now.

This conference is an excellent example of what is happening now and how this will positively influence growing older in Wales

I'm sure we all share the ambition to make a positive difference and improve the lives of older people across Wales. Not just those who are over 60 today - but also planning ahead for the significantly greater numbers of over 60s and over 85s that will need to access information and services in years to come.

**Conclusion.**

In conclusion, I hope I have given you an insight into my role and powers, what has happened since I took up post in April and an outline of my vision for the Older People's Commission.

I am focused on how I will be able to champion the interests of older people as well as promote and safeguard their dignity and human rights.

I would like to thank Vivienne, Judith and Vanessa who have kindly offered me support and advice over the past few months.

I look forward to working with all of you in future.

The crucial thing is to make sure that the Commission delivers on what matters most to older people across Wales.

Older People in Wales have a powerful voice and as Commissioner I will support their voice to be heard.

I hope that together we can make Wales the best place to grow old.

Thank you. Diolch yn fawr.