

Food Poverty and Older People

The consequences of not eating a healthy, balanced diet can be severe.

Malnutrition is becoming an increasing problem amongst older people and can leave people lacking in energy and prone to illness and depression.

Our research has shown food poverty could be a very real problem for many older people in Wales.

With an ageing population it is likely that unless action is taken the situation could become more prevalent and acute.

Current Situation

Increasing life expectancy and diminishing birth rates mean the age profile of our population is changing.

Eating a nutritious balanced diet helps us to maintain a healthy body and mind - helping us to, amongst other things, fight infection, maintain energy levels, retain a sense of well-being, and keep warm.

What is 'food poverty'?

The three main characteristics of food poverty include:

Affordability: Low/limited incomes may restrict an older person's ability to afford healthy food;

Accessibility: The proximity, and ease of travelling to, supermarkets and smaller, independent retailers that offer a range of healthy foods;

**Education/
Cooking Skills:** Some older people, particularly older men, may lack the skills and/or equipment to prepare healthy meals.

Has this problem been recognised?

In recent years the promotion of health and well being in old age has moved up the policy agenda.

However it would appear there's much more work to do.

What is stopping people from tackling the problems?

Our research has highlighted a number of key issues that need to be addressed. These include:

- the availability of door-to-door transport;
- the availability of 'assisted shopping';
- problems in using standard kitchen utensils/equipment;
- importance of social opportunities and interaction with others;
- the need for practical advice on healthy eating;
- the provision of smaller portion sizes.

Are they the only problems?

Overall, the most commonly mentioned problem centred on mobility problems - difficulties carrying heavy shopping from the shop to home and difficulties preparing and cooking meals in the home.

The changing face of food retailing means that most people now have to travel further to shop for food. For those with access to a car this poses less of a problem however for those reliant on public transport it can make life difficult.

It is also important to note that, as we have found in our research, the supermarket isn't necessarily the 'big evil' as far as older people are concerned. The vast majority undertake most of their food shopping at supermarkets and for those with disabilities they are better equipped in terms of parking and other facilities than smaller, high street retailers.

What needs to change?

Improving transport, more home delivery services/mobile shops and assisted shopping have all been specified as potential solutions.

A lack of motivation to cook also appears to be common, especially for those living on their own. The majority of the people we spoke to agreed that regular social interaction is a key element of maintaining both mental and physical well-being as you get older.

Steps towards a solution:

Provision of door-to-door service:

- We should explore opportunities for a door-to-door service. Supermarkets could also publicise their home delivery services directly to older people.

Assisted shopping schemes:

- Supermarkets could introduce 'older people shopping days', with 'personal shoppers' on-hand.

- Colleges and Universities can set-up 'shopping partner' schemes in which student volunteers help older people to do their food shopping.

Using standard kitchen utensils/equipment:

- Kitchen utensils and equipment have been specifically designed with older people in mind. Information about these needs to be available/promoted.

Social interaction & intergenerational schemes:

- Local authorities could set-up agreements with Age Concern to develop lunch clubs at local schools/colleges.

Practical advice on healthy eating:

- All Community care staff and home carers should be trained to spot malnutrition and provide dietary advice if needed.

Smaller portion sizes:

- Retailers should recognise that there is a need which their products do not currently satisfy.

Community food initiatives:

- Community food initiatives must continue but have to be resourced in a sustainable way to meet the needs of an ageing population.

A full copy of the 'Food Poverty and Older People' report is available from:

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