

# The Guardian

## Wales care crisis: 'We've been trying to get him home for months'

Cash-strapped Welsh councils face bankruptcy over care costs due to huge rise in number of older people

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Bryan Jones, 75, who has been at Castle Court residential home since last October: 'I miss my friends dropping in and going on the bus to get my shopping. I'm not used to people holding my hand.' Photograph: Dimitris Legakis/Athena Pictures

**B**ryan Jones sips from a steaming mug of tea and glances wistfully out of the window of a care home in the Welsh border town of Chepstow. The 75-year-old is keen to go back to his beloved house near Tintern Abbey, but Monmouthshire county council has been unable to arrange any care for him for five months. "I want to get back to living a normal life ... or as normal life as I can," he says. "I miss my friends dropping in and going on the bus to get my shopping. I can run my own affairs from home – I'm not used to people holding my hand."

Jones, a former engineer, was admitted to hospital after a fall and then moved to [Castle Court residential home](#) in October.

"We've been trying to get him home ever since," says his social worker, Lynne Wheadon. "He's done really well but he does need help with things like washing and meals."

His cousin, Dee Jones, a retired gerontologist, is frustrated that he has been waiting for months. "There's nothing much wrong with him physically apart from being sedentary and left in bed for too long," she says. "The longer somebody isn't autonomous, the more dependent they become. He used to walk down a hill to catch the bus to go into Chepstow every day. Now he uses a walking frame."

Jones's predicament illustrates the human crisis blighting the final years of people's lives and putting at risk the finances of councils across Wales. The problem has become so acute that the Welsh government is for the first time considering introducing a "[social care levy](#)" to plug the gap. This would see income taxes rise by at least 1.5% under new devolved powers, which could raise £300m a year.

Last month [Monmouthshire revealed it had a near £4m deficit](#), amid rocketing demand for adult and children's care services. The Conservative-controlled council hopes to make up the shortfall by [selling council assets](#) and applying for one-off grants from the Welsh government. But council [papers warn it needs to find another £5.5m in the next financial year](#) to meet rising social care costs.

Penny Jones, Monmouthshire's cabinet member for social services, fears what the future might hold, with the council currently unable to arrange 700 hours of care. "We are struggling to keep afloat," she says. "We are a rural county and we have the fastest-growing population of older people in Wales." The county has seen a [20% increase in over-65s](#) and over-85s since 2011.

"Our main problem is home care, especially in rural areas. It's hard to get and keep carers when they earn more stacking shelves in Tesco. We are trying everything but we are strapped," says Jones.

These problems are not just confined to Monmouthshire. Wales is the country with the oldest population in the UK, with the number of over-75s due to increase by [70% and over-85s expected to double by 2040](#). These demographic pressures coupled with rising numbers of children in care and a decade of austerity – which has seen [Welsh councils lose 20% of their funding](#) – have pushed many councils into the red. According to the Welsh Local Government Association, 17 councils have overspent by £35m this year to meet increasing social care bills.

Privately, senior council officers speculate grimly about which council will become the first in [Wales](#) to follow in the footsteps of Northamptonshire, which in effect declared itself bankrupt in 2018 after it revealed it could not meet its financial obligations. "I can think of a handful of authorities that are running multimillion-pound deficits due to social care," says John Rae, the Welsh LGA's director of resources. These include Gwynedd and Flintshire which have projected overspends of £3.8m and £1.6m respectively for 2019-20. "Councils are facing unrelenting demand in social care and children services," he says.

Although the Welsh government has increased overall funding for local authorities by [£6bn in the next financial year](#), councils are still struggling to keep up with the demand for social care, which is [increasing by 5.5% every year](#). "It certainly helps but it is not meeting all the pressures on local government. Councils need £254m extra for all services in the next financial year, with social care making up £140m of that," adds Rae. "The Welsh government has given them [an additional £184m for all services](#)."



Barry Priest, who has been in Chepstow community hospital since October. 'My wife would like me to be at home. I see her almost every day which is some consolation, but it's not the same as being at home.' Photograph: Dimitris Legakis/Athena Pictures

Back in Monmouthshire, Barry Priest in Chepstow community hospital has been waiting to go home to his wife, Nina, since October. "My wife would like me to be at home," he says. "I see her almost every day which is some consolation ... but it's not the same as being at home."

The 87-year-old retired farm worker was moved to the hospital after he was treated for a fall at the Royal Gwent hospital in Newport in July. The council's social care team has been unable to find carers to meet his needs, which have grown, in part due to the length of his stay.

"When he first went in, he could walk," says Nina. "But he goes from the bed into the chair and from the chair into the bed. They wheel him to the toilet because they are short-staffed. Anybody would lose their legs like that."

She says her husband shouldn't have to spend what remains of his life in an unfamiliar environment. "It just drags on and on. He's clear-headed. He knows what he wants. He just loves his home – the older you are, the more precious it is," she says. "I miss him. When you are on your own, you just rattle around the house."

It is not only a personal tragedy for the Priests. Barry is occupying a desperately needed hospital bed in the midst of a particularly tough NHS winter crisis in Wales, with [waiting times in A&E hitting record levels](#) and operations being cancelled. Social worker Annette Brady, the service manager at Chepstow community hospital, says it is the worst it has ever been during her 20-year career. "It is desperate. We had a red alert on Friday. There were no beds in the Royal Gwent hospital. They had people in A&E or outside in ambulances," she says. "We didn't have the capacity to open up our beds but we do have old people here waiting for care packages."

The [latest figures](#) show there were 125 elderly people waiting for social care in Welsh hospitals in December – an increase of 39% on the same month in 2009.

The Welsh government is well aware of these mounting pressures and cannot wait for [Boris Johnson's vague social care plans](#), which could take at least five years to put in place. The health minister, Vaughan Gething, proposes to consult in the spring on options including a social care levy, which could be implemented after the assembly

election next year. “I’m open to the idea of using our tax powers here in Wales,” he says. “I would like us to be in a position in the next Welsh parliament to change the way we provide social care and how we fund it.”

This cannot come soon enough for families with loved ones stuck in hospitals and care homes. Nina feels her husband has been let down by a system he paid into his whole life. “Nobody should have to go through this,” she says. “He started working at 14. He was in the marines. When a person is young, they do so much. But when they are old, the plate comes around and it is empty.”