Introduction

By 2020 one in four European Union citizens will be aged 60 years or over. Between 2000 and 2040 in the small geographical area that is Northern Ireland the proportion of people aged over 60 will double. The Northern Ireland population is projected to increase from its 1998 estimate of 1,689,000 to 1,828,000 in 2023 – a rise of 139,000. During this period there will be a 15% decrease in under-16 olds and a 12% decrease in 16-29 year olds. Conversely there will be an increase of 37% in 45-64 year olds and 48% in 60-74 year olds. There will be a 57% increase in those aged 75 and over. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the current situation.

Table 1

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<tr>
<td>Population of Northern Ireland</td>
<td>1,691,824</td>
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<tr>
<td>People aged 50 years and over</td>
<td>472,576</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population aged 60 years and over</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population aged 75 years and over</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Households headed by person over 65</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older households who are owner occupiers</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older households living in NIHE accommodation</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>People over 65 in receipt of Home Help Service</td>
<td>23,963</td>
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Political Structures and Public Administration

Unfortunately since its re-introduction in 1999 devolved government in Northern Ireland has experienced recurring problems and remains suspended since October 2002. The suspension of the devolved institutions has created a degree of uncertainty regarding the implementation of the last Executive’s Programme for
Government and there is concern that with the return of Direct Rule many pressing issues affecting the lives of older people might not receive the urgent attention they require.

However one significant aspect of the political settlement that did survive the suspension was Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which is a requirement on all public authorities to devise and implement equality schemes. This process is overseen by the Equality Commission. Nine categories or groups of people fall within the scope of the legislation and age is included for the first time. The legislation means, in effect, that public authorities must ensure that when carrying out their responsibilities they have ‘due regard’ that they do not adversely impact on any of the nine categories. If they uncover adverse impacts when screening their policies, and particularly in conducting Equality Impact Assessments, they are required to put in place procedures to mitigate against such outcomes.

An Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG), a grouping of older people’s organisations, was formed with the remit specifically to:

- co-ordinate work on Section 75;
- support the older person’s representative on the Civic Forum (set up under the 1998 Belfast Agreement to provide a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues, and which includes a representative of the older community);
- liaise and work with the Northern Ireland Assembly Cross-Party Group on Ageing.

The ASRG is currently reviewing its membership, terms of reference and record.

In 2001 the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission conducted a review of the human rights of older people in Northern Ireland and published a report. It outlined a number of defects in current law and practice which have a particularly adverse effect on older people.

**Services for Older People**

A range of statutory bodies has the duty to provide public services for older people in Northern Ireland. Among these are the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the five Education and Library Boards, the four Health and Social Services Boards, the 19 Health and Social Services Trusts and nine Health and Social Services Agencies, and the 26 local councils. The local councils have recently acquired a community safety role of particular interest to older people through the formation of local Community Safety Partnerships.

The role of a Health and Social Services Board is central to this provision. The Boards commission a comprehensive range of care services on behalf of the community and commission contracts for care services with:

- Health and Social Services Trusts;
- voluntary organisations;
- the independent sector (for example, nursing home providers).

An important part of a Health and Social Services Board’s overall role concerns its relationship to, and co-operation with, General Practitioners. Older people are more
likely to have to visit GPs and they are thus viewed as the gatekeepers to other services.

There is a thriving voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. Age Concern Northern Ireland and Help the Aged are the best known non-governmental organisations working with and on behalf of the older community. In addition, there are a number of well organised forums and consortiums of older people’s organisations, usually organised on a local basis, in places such as North Belfast, West Belfast, Newry and Mourne, Sperrin and Lakeland, Newtownabbey and Castlereagh, as well as retired professional and trade union members associations including the Northern Ireland Pensioners Convention.

There are specialised housing associations for older people, including Fold Housing Association and Oaklee Housing Association. There are organisations for dementia, including the Alzheimer’s Disease Society. The majority of these organisations are members of the Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG).

Older people are involved with hundreds of neighbourhood-based and church-based organisations. Many thousands of older people are volunteers and many more are carers, whose advocacy group is Carers Northern Ireland. Indeed the care system in Northern Ireland would simply grind to a halt without them.

The last Programme for Government committed the Northern Ireland Executive to open new channels of communication with older people. Under Direct Rule, this work will be taken forward in the context of the Promoting Social Inclusion element of the New Targeting Social Need policy. A Working Group on Older People has drawn together experts and interests from both inside and outside government to identify needs and set out the planning priorities for older people. It will consider factors which cause older people to be at risk of social exclusion and work to develop a co-ordinated strategy to tackle them. The Group will present Ministers with a draft policy and strategy document for public consultation. This consultation document will be launched on 21 June 2004.

**Social Exclusion**

The reasons why some older people experience social exclusion are complex and multi-faceted. Professor Alan Walker of the University of Sheffield has identified five dimensions to older people’s exclusion, and it would be worthwhile considering these in relation to the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland – this will help to highlight gaps in provision:

- **insufficient income** to be able to participate in society;
- **where a person lives** has a bearing on exclusion. Research shows that older women living in more remote areas experience some of the highest rates of exclusion, as do older people living in disadvantaged urban housing estates;
- **discrimination** affects people’s access to services and their ability to earn income independently over a longer period of their life. The EU’s Equal Treatment Directive will help to protect older people in the workplace;
- **lack of access to transport** which is vital to access services and facilities;
ill-health and disability curtails the independence crucial to feeling one is a valuable member of a family, community or society.

**Income**

Although the UK state pension age is currently 60 for women and 65 for men, there is no official retirement age. Between 2010 and 2020 the pension age will be increased to 65 for women.

Increasing the take-up of benefits by older people who are entitled to them but do not claim them remains a major problem in Northern Ireland. A recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report estimated that one-third of older people are considered to be on low incomes - 81,000 people - and up to 36,000 of these have not applied for benefits for which they are likely to be eligible. While 'struggling to make ends meet', they are missing out on millions of pounds.

**Table 2**

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<tr>
<th>Household Income (Family Expenditure Survey 1994/5)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Average weekly household income by age of head of household:</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>£454.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 years and over</td>
<td>£197.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income Support Claimants over 60</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
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A series of factors also prevent many people making adequate financial provisions for their latter years. These include:

- average earnings that are significantly lower than national (UK) average earnings. This impairs individual capacity to make provision for retirement and reduces the accrual of the State Earnings Related Pensions Scheme (SERPS) provision, which is in effect an additional state pension for those in employment;
- a high incidence of self-employment, much of which is likely to be at best only marginally profitable. The absence of any SERPS pension in this sector and impaired capacity to make private provision for retirement militate against adequate retirement income;
- substantial numbers dependent either on farming or agriculture related businesses. The prevalence of small farms, the decline in agricultural profitability and the trend towards reductions or withdrawals of UK and EU support are having an adverse affect on agricultural incomes and consequent capacity to make personal pension provision;
- the increasing trend towards part-time and temporary employment (e.g. in the catering, tourist and retail sectors) generally resulting in a high degree of dependence on state benefits in later life;
- a preponderance of small employers less likely to offer membership of high quality pension arrangements;
- historically high unemployment rates, especially long term unemployment.
Unless there are significant structural changes to the Northern Ireland economy which generate increased wealth and employment over a sustained period of time, it is unlikely that larger numbers of people will be able to make greater provision for themselves. In the absence of such change, and continued and increasing reliance on means-testing instead of providing an adequate state pension, the reality is that the gap between wealthier and poorer older people, which has been widening, will continue to do so.

**Where a person lives**

In Northern Ireland rural areas are home to significant numbers of older residents and in these areas older people form an important resource for economic and community development. 12% of family farms in Northern Ireland contain only persons of retirement age and 42% of people over the age of 16 engaged in farming were over the age of 50. For many farmers retirement is not an option.

Access to services in rural areas is a major issue. In recent times the increased centralisation of services, such as hospitals and banks, has resulted in increased journey times and presented additional problems for those for whom personal mobility is a difficulty. Policy makers need to look at the impact of their actions on this significant rural group from a more holistic perspective. Health and welfare are but one aspect of this multi-dimensional sector. The environment, culture and heritage of rural Northern Ireland offer considerable economic potential and older rural people have much to contribute. There is a need to develop a strategy that will identify the needs and aspirations of older people in rural areas, the economic, cultural and social contribution they make, and how this contribution can be further enhanced.

Failure to implement effective measures will lead to the disappearance of a way of life. Politicians, planners, the private sector and service deliverers need to be aware of the consequences of this failure on the lives of older (and indeed all) people who live in rural areas.

Available, affordable and accessible transport is what members of the older community require and there is dissatisfaction with present provision on all three counts. There was a warm welcome for the introduction of free transport for those over 65, and a feeling that this would not have been introduced in the absence of a devolved administration. However frustrations remain regarding the plight of female pensioners aged 60-64 and the fact that the Smartpass (to access that free transport) cannot be used on community transport. Free transport means little in a rural area which is not served, or served very infrequently, by public transport. The transport needs of older people require permanent funding as part of a broader commitment to a public transport policy to reverse the negative excesses of the car culture.

**Discrimination**

Too many older people living in Northern Ireland face particular challenges of discrimination, poverty and lack of recognition of the positive contribution they make. They want equality of opportunity and the choice to work as long as they choose through flexible working patterns. They want recognition of the substantial
role they play in caring and family life, public health promotion, education and peer support.

The age sector in Northern Ireland expects that government will fulfil its commitment to a Single Equality Bill which will be extended to cover goods, facilities and services. The sector welcomes the identification of older people as a priority under the Promoting Social Inclusion initiative.

With regard to the economy, the report of the Northern Ireland Ageing Population Panel makes specific reference to the challenges and opportunities that are emerging. It says that, given the continuing decline in the numbers of young people, “ageism will be a luxury the Northern Ireland economy can no longer afford”. In particular, we need to:

- support those who wish to become older entrepreneurs;
- recognise the need to develop appropriate training for older employees and employment practices to retain them;
- capitalise on the full range of business opportunities afforded by the ‘age shift’;
- develop innovative ways in which the older rural labour market can be educated and supported to diversify.

The development of an Age Positive campaign by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, mirroring those in England, Scotland and Wales, has been encouraging in this respect.

**Ill Health, Disability and Security**

It is widely recognised that older people are more likely to suffer from a longstanding illness, to have to visit a general practitioner or to experience mobility problems. Research in Northern Ireland indicates that 19% of people over 50 years have mobility problems compared with 10% of the population as a whole. It is acknowledged that achieving better health requires major changes in public attitudes and cultural values among people of all ages and that resources for such education need to be adequate to the size of the task. The mental health of older people has, for example, received comparatively little attention or investment.

People with dementia and their carers comprise an especially marginalised sub-group of (mostly older) people. Despite the sterling work being done by many individuals and organisations – including the efforts of the Dementia Forum, various impressive housing and care initiatives, and the introduction this autumn of an e-learning Diploma and MSc in Dementia Studies course – much remains to be done. Has the time come to revive the idea of a dementia services development centre to serve the needs of people in Northern Ireland, which is the only part of the United Kingdom and Ireland not to have such a centre?

A longstanding debate on the adequacy of resources available to provide health and social services for older people continues, and broad support remains for the continued integration of health and social care in Northern Ireland.
One of the major issues affecting the quality of older people’s lives in Northern Ireland is long-term care. A recent Royal Commission on this subject recommended that both nursing and personal care should be free based on an assessment of need, and there is strong support for this recommendation. Paying for nursing care through having to sell one’s home or use one’s savings is a contentious issue in Northern Ireland. While £100 per week is now contributed by the State towards the cost of nursing care for those meeting the full cost of their care, a distinction is made between nursing and personal care. The latter still has to be paid by the older person.

Feeling safe and secure is an additional area of concern to many older people in Northern Ireland. It is no comfort to a victim to be told that statistically they are unlucky, or that fear of crime among older people is significantly higher than the actual incidence of crime. The effect of crime on older people can have a devastating, even fatal impact. It can be compounded by what comes afterwards:

- an intrusive media (some call this double victimisation);
- lack of information on the progress of an investigation;
- low detection and clear-up rates;
- lenient sentences which add to the feeling of victimhood;
- the negativity experienced by older people going through the judicial system as witnesses.

An effective, adequately resourced community safety strategy for older people is vital. This should include protocols for the Police Service of Northern Ireland in their contact with older people and also for the media in their portrayal of older victims. District Policing Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships have been formed at local level to co-ordinate community safety initiatives. It is essential that the voice of the older community is adequately represented on these bodies.

**Housing**

Housing plays a key role in the well-being of older people. They regard their homes not merely as a shelter but also a place to feel safe, secure and warm and in which to live comfortably and independently for as long as possible. Older people have a wide range of differing housing needs, including design and provision, access, affordability and choice. Service providers must address issues of advice and information, homelessness, and the links between housing, health, care and support. Many older people in Northern Ireland live in inadequate housing which is not suitable to their needs and others presently living in suitable housing may find it does not suit them as they grow older. The availability of choice for older people to move, if necessary, to housing more suited to their needs is therefore a key element of an acceptable housing policy.

**Conclusion**

Ageing is a dynamic process and one that is relevant to us all. As the Promoting Social Inclusion Group in Northern Ireland has pointed out: “Older people are captains of industry, innovators and leading professionals in their field. Yet older people are also particularly vulnerable to social exclusion in a number of specific
areas. They can experience poverty and diminishing savings; feel abandoned and isolated; live in fear of crime; experience illness and disability. Many have lived through thirty years of violence, and the hurt, trauma and pain still live on, often silently, in their memories”.

As we have seen, the reasons why older people are excluded are complex and multi-faceted. There is clearly both a ‘North/South’ and ‘East/West’ element to addressing them. The five dimensions to older people’s exclusion outlined by Professor Walker may provide a starting point to identifying areas for this kind of co-operation. A number of specific areas for possible cross-border co-operation spring to mind:

- pooling good practice and expertise in setting up and implementing benefit take-up plans;
- developing a comprehensive strategy to identify the needs and aspirations of older people in rural areas;
- mirroring the co-operation between the Equality Commission in the North and the Equality Authority in the South to help the community and voluntary sector in both jurisdictions to enhance expertise and develop more effective advocacy on behalf of the older community;
- jointly researching and resourcing community development approaches to active ageing.

These should be taken together with the proposal for the establishment of a dementia services development centre in Northern Ireland, perhaps with support from the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre in Dublin and in the context of the proposed establishment of an All Ireland Institute of Ageing.

As we have seen, older people are an extremely diverse group and this diversity is an increasing feature of social change in the 1990s. Many of the major differences are related to social class, gender and ethnicity. At the same time similarities of experience, North and South, are important. Twenty years ago we were still dealing with a ‘modernist’ view of growing old, one which looked to the institutions of the State to support an ageing population. Now ageing has all the complexities and hallmarks of a ‘post-modern’ society: a range of lifestyles, a focus on individual choice, and a more detached role for the state.

Do we have a vision of what a society free from ageism and age discrimination would look like? What should be the balance between the various sectors – public, private, voluntary, the family and the individual – in developing a society that is for all ages? The way forward requires commitment from all interests and the major task must be to restore vision and purpose to what is a genuine triumph of the preceding 100 years, increased longevity.

While moral imperatives and expectations vis-à-vis social policy and older people are important, they need to be underpinned by economic, social and cultural imperatives. Building a society for all ages also requires older people to recognise their own multiple identities and the need to mainstream older people’s issues through, among other things, convincing other age groups that ageing issues are relevant to all. Older people and their representative organisations will not only need to consider alliances within their own sector, but will have to build allegiances and alliances that link across
generations and identity groups. The challenge will be to recognise and profit from these links while defending the interests of all citizens as they age.

Select Bibliography

Age Concern Northern Ireland, *Agenda for the Age: the Road Ahead for Older People in Northern Ireland* (ACNI 2000).


