

HANSARD REPORT

'Appreciating Age': A Report from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland's Report, 'Appreciating Age', which places an economic value on the wide and varied contributions made by the over-60s across Northern Ireland; acknowledges the positive contributions made by older people through caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting and working; and will seek to challenge negative perceptions around older age in order to make Northern Ireland a better place to grow old.

This is an all-party motion, and we thank the Business Committee for facilitating and prioritising it, given the timing of it and the launch of the recent report. I welcome the junior Minister Jennifer McCann to the debate. Her presence and comments are important.

I welcome the opportunity to highlight the positive contributions — and Jonathan, thank you; both of you are very welcome — made by older people across Northern Ireland and to recognise the many and varied roles that they play in our lives. The report clearly attaches an economic value to the many and varied contributions that they make. The SDLP welcomed the establishment of an older persons' commissioner and would like to thank her for the work that she has done to ensure that the voice of older people is heard and that they are involved in all policy-making decisions at that level.

Northern Ireland is an ageing society, with the most rapidly ageing population in the UK. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) figures show that, by 2062 — a long way away — there will be an additional 318,000 people over 60 in Northern Ireland than there are today. For too long, we have heard just one side of the story: that older people cost money and that they are an economic burden. When cuts to public services need to be made, it is often older people's services that are cut. The motion offers an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that older people actually contribute more than they cost — a staggering £24.7 billion over the next 50 years.

Among the contributions included in the report were caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting, kinship care and working, as well as paying taxes that, over the next 50 years, will amount to a staggering £117 billion. We all know someone who looks after their grandchildren, a spouse or a family member. In 2012, older carers saved the Northern Ireland economy almost £1.02 billion. We are all aware of many older people who volunteer.

In my constituency, there are many examples of good volunteering by older people who play key roles, including the Culture Company volunteers who ensured the smooth running of events during our wonderful City of Culture year last year. Many of them

were over 60, they brought maturity and a sense of perspective to their job, and they acted as mentors in many regards to many of the younger people who participated in the events. Many older people continue to work and, therefore, continue to contribute to the economic fabric of our society through their taxes and other financial contributions.

The commissioner's report also takes account of the associated costs of older age-related spending, including benefits such as pension credits, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and winter fuel payments as well as protected housing and health and social care costs. The projected spending over the next 50 years is £92.2 billion.

The report challenges the one-dimensional view of ageing and tells the untold story of the positive ways in which older people contribute to our society day in and day out and how they will continue to do so for years to come. The report is based over 50 years; therefore, it is in everyone's interest to change the way we as a society view and talk about older people.

The SDLP wants to see an end to discrimination against older people in the workplace. As well as being grossly unjust, such discrimination is costly and inefficient. All of us, one day, will be deemed older — many of us probably already are by many of the younger generation. None of us would like to think that our age would stop us contributing positively to society. I will continue to promote the rights of older people in every aspect of work in the Assembly. I welcome the commissioner's report and wish to fully support the motion.

Mr Weir: It is good to see a motion that has cross-party support, and I think that the House will unite today. It is also cross-generational. Mention was made of those who will be turning 60. I look to Mr Lyttle, who will be turning 60 a few years after me, and I look to others in the Chamber, such as Mr Ramsey and Mrs Dobson, who will be turning 60 a few years before me.

Mr Ramsey: Point of order.

Mr Weir: Pat, if you are younger than me, you have had a very hard paper round.

I look to colleagues to my left, such as Mr Anderson, who has achieved that level of —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It might be time to stop digging, Peter.

[Laughter.]

Mr Weir: Yes, I know.

Quite often, when we are debating the issue of an ageing society, there is a tendency to concentrate on the negative aspects and so we look at, for example, the impact on pension provision as we look into the future and at the impact on the health service. It is particularly positive today that we are able to look not simply at the very positive aspects that our older community contributes but at ones that are based on hard evidence and hard fact and that show a very positive way forward. That can be shown through a number of aspects. For example, the extent to which there will be a higher number of older people in years to come has been mentioned. In many ways, we look at the problems in the health service, but it is sometimes important to take a step back and say that a tremendous positive has happened in the last generations in the extent to

which people's life expectancy has increased. That is positive and to be celebrated. Sadly, we often still see in our society tragedies such as that last week in north Antrim where a young person died. The old adage about life expectancy is three score years and 10 or 70 years. However, now, if somebody dies at the age of 70, it is deemed to be quite young. The vast bulk of our citizens can look forward to a much greater age. We should celebrate that.

With celebrating age and appreciating age, as the report says, it is also about respect for age. I found myself in the unusual situation of having common cause with the Member for Mid Ulster Ian Milne when, at the weekend, I saw and took exception to the portrayal of a 94-year-old man from Castledawson whose contribution to a programme was subtitled. I think that it was completely unnecessary for it to happen, and the question in my mind when thinking about that was this: did the BBC subtitle him because of where he came from or because he was 94 and perceived to be frail and elderly? Either way, it is unacceptable. It shows the need for us to show respect for the full community, particularly our older folk.

The importance of the report is in highlighting not just the individual stories but the broad facts and figures and the financial contribution that is to be made over the next number of years. Financial circumstances mean that a lot of people now go beyond retirement age, and, although some of that can be through the pressures of economic circumstances, in other cases, there is an opportunity for people to work on through choice and have that liberating experience. They can make an enormous contribution. The report is particularly good in highlighting, in many ways, the hidden advantages of the financial contribution that has been made. We talk about contributions, particularly as the glue to hold the family together, whether it is through volunteering — the proposer referred to the City of Culture but it can be on a whole range of subjects — whether it is through the contribution of care as unpaid carers or whether it is on the basis of either childcare with the grandparents directly looking after their grandchildren or, indeed, even as replacement parenting. A massive contribution is made to our society that, in the report, is highlighted at around £25 billion in net contribution, which is probably a conservative estimate. That is even taking into account the various cost aspects that are in play.

I believe that there are a great deal of positives in the report. I commend the Older People's Commissioner for producing the report. There is a lot of substance in it, and I look forward to the rest of the debate. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion, which welcomes the Commissioner for Older People, Claire Keatinge's major report, 'Appreciating Age'. I commend the commissioner for her efforts to reframe the debate regarding older people and society while having the contributions of older people properly valued. More importantly, we, as legislators, must draw upon the report's positive findings and make time for exploring how best we can invest resources, time and effort in making our local communities great places to grow old. The report, which was launched on the UN International Day of Older Persons, reveals that the over-60s living in the North of Ireland will contribute almost £25 billion to the economy over the next 50 years through

volunteering, caring, childcare, replacement parenting and working. The report attaches an economic value to contributions made by older people to highlight the positive roles that they play, while considering the cost of older-age-related spending, subtracting those costs from the total contributions in order to give a true reflection of the net economic value older people bring to society.

6.15 pm

As more of our citizens are living longer and healthier lives than ever before, older people work, volunteer, provide care and participate widely in community and family life, contributing significant social and economic value to life in our local communities. The report helps to ensure that those important contributions do not go overlooked. Along with a full range of civic actors, we must challenge the negative voices that say that older people are a burden on public expenditure and, therefore, on society.

'Appreciating Age' challenges the negative perception that older people are a drain on the public purse, as it clearly shows that the over-60s put much more into society than they take out, in economic and in social terms, to the tune of almost £25 billion. The report, however, is not just about older people. Those who are 20, 30 and 40 years of age today are the older people of tomorrow. They will contribute in many different ways over the next 50 years, so it is in all our interests to change the way wider society perceives older age.

My colleague junior Minister Jennifer McCann made the following comment at the time of the report:

"As this report shows, we all gain from the contribution of older people to society. Too often the discussion focuses on the costs related to an ageing population. However, older people have extensive life experience and skills to share".

I am glad that the Executive have committed to creating a society that values older people and supports them to live actively to their fullest potential. The Executive's Active Ageing strategy aims to ensure strong foundations for the future generation of older people to age with respect, dignity, choice and good health.

While commending the good work and many initiatives aimed at promoting positive and active ageing, we must not allow austerity to hit our older people. People who need a nursing home or home care must be able to count on it unconditionally. Austerity should not affect the basic needs and dignity of our older people. If we are to ask people to work longer, we need to give them opportunities. Equal access to employment, education and health insurance are crucial, as well as opportunities to contribute to an active and healthy life in old age.

It is critical that we recognise our debt to older people and encourage everyone to challenge ageism and fully appreciate the vast contribution that older people make, socially and economically, to make our society a better place. The report dispels the myth that is often propagated in the media, which is the idea that ageing populations are a burden on the state, on working people and on younger people.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to tonight's debate. I did smile, however, during Mr Weir's contribution, when he pointed out that I would reach

pensionable age before him — a fact that I know people watching the debate will find incredible.

[Laughter.]

Mr Weir: It is true.

Mrs Dobson: True, but not to those observing. I will give him style tips at some point.

[Laughter.]

As has been said too often when we are discussing a growing and ageing population, too much of the focus is on the cost of support and not on what our older people give back to society in return. There is no doubt that an increasing elderly population will put greater pressure on some of our care services, but we must never forget that those additional costs are offset by the massive contribution that our elderly people make in their later years. They are not only an economic asset worth heralding through directly supporting our local economy but our elderly generation make a major societal impact on their communities.

On a day when the Assembly considered yet further fundamental reform to our pension system, it is imperative that we look at the massive and positive contribution of our elderly population. Whilst the report is to be warmly welcomed, I note that pension costs have not been included. In basic financial terms, we cannot ignore that fact of life. Until we look properly at pension costs, how can we plan for the pressures of our ageing population?

It is to be celebrated that people are living longer and are able to continue to make a greater contribution to our society than was possible in the past. That is why it is important that older people have the opportunity to continue working, if they choose to do so. We all know many examples of older people who are doing brilliant work and providing key services. Take, for instance, grandparents providing childcare for their children's children. In some of those cases, without that arrangement, the cost of childcare would be too prohibitive to allow the parent to work at all.

The childcare role is especially relevant in Northern Ireland, where, despite the many promises and strategies, our local childcare system is still largely ineffective. In addition, without the dedication and commitment of older people, many of our best-known charities would not be nearly as successful. As I know too well from my association with the many local organ donation charities, volunteers, many of them over 50, make a fantastic contribution every day. The value of volunteering, whether through charities or, indeed, our church organisations, is enormous each year and could never be accurately costed. From supporting local events to sitting on committees and relaying their knowledge and experience, older people are often the backbone of many local charities and institutions, using their expertise to help others and bring forward leaders and champions for the future.

Whilst the Assembly talks about preparing to care for an ageing population, we must remember that older people themselves are often the ones providing the care. At a time when our Health Department and the trusts appear so committed to reducing key services, huge numbers of older people living here say that they regularly help out their

elderly neighbours. If services like domiciliary care are to be reduced, reliance on that generosity is only likely to grow. In addition, it is hard to get an absolute definitive value of the contribution made through care, as it is typical of Northern Ireland people to be modest when asked how many hours they spend helping their neighbours and friends.

We need to remember that growing numbers of older people are exploring new opportunities as they reach pension age. Those in the current generation of pensioners — the baby boomer generation — are the best educated that Northern Ireland and the UK have ever seen. People in the current generation, with their relatively good health, ideas and energy, will no doubt make an even greater contribution than their predecessors.

In conclusion, I hope that tonight's debate will have a positive impact on the wider public debate about the future of our ageing population.

Mr Lyttle: The Alliance Party fully supports the all-party motion and commends the excellent work in 'Appreciating Age', the Commissioner for Older People's report. The report sets out clearly the immense value of older people and the vital contribution that they make to our community. I recognise the wider work of the Commissioner for Older People and her staff. One of the key commitments in her corporate plan is the promotion of positive attitudes towards and about older people. I think that this evidence-based research is a clear demonstration that the commission is well on its way to achieving that aim.

The report complements the work that the commissioner did in a previous report, 'Valuing an Ageing Workforce', the launch of which the Alliance Minister for Employment and Learning, Stephen Farry, supported here at the Assembly. That report clearly states that, if the Government can enable older people to remain in the workforce for as long as they wish, the benefit could be as much as £2.3 billion by 2037. I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning's investment in lifelong learning, including the Step Ahead 50+ programme, which is in line with the Alliance Party manifesto commitment to lifelong learning, as well as skills development to help older people to remain economically active and independent.

I would also like to recognise the work of the NGOs in our community, such as GEMS NI, that have excellent lifelong learning programmes for older people.

We have heard that Northern Ireland is indeed an ageing society. We are living longer lives, and that absolutely must be celebrated. However, there are also negative perceptions or, as Age NI aptly put it, "benign prejudices" about older people that must be tackled.

The report not only collects very valuable data but has some key testimonies from vital organisations such as Business in the Community, which states:

"Older workers are now the fastest growing age group in the labour market", and that there are opportunities for employers to harness the skills and experiences of older people. Parenting NI states:

"many families would lose out both financially and in emotional stability if it were not for the support of grandparents",
and that children,

"gain enormously from having a second nurturing environment".

We also have Volunteer Now, which states:

"Older volunteers are a very important resource for the community in Northern Ireland, giving their time to support a range of community activities and services".

I think of the many football coaches I have had over the years and of Cecil Braniff, who is a fixture at our own football club. He puts in many hours, despite being of an old age. He is an extremely active gentleman. I think of Boys' Brigade leaders and GAA volunteers whom we saw at the weekend coming together for the Game for Anto. There are those in our churches, and there are community safety volunteers, like Street By Street, in my constituency, East Belfast. These are all people who make vital contributions to our community.

We also hear from Carers NI, who reference the fact that:

"our community care system would collapse without the input of older carers. However, this unpaid work needs to be valued and supported, otherwise it can come at a real cost to the older carer's own health and wellbeing".

Kinship Care is a vital organisation which estimates that between 8,000 and 10,000 children live in kinship care and a huge proportion of them — 41% — are with grandparents. There are key testimonies drawn out in the report.

There is also valuable data that over the next 50 years older people will contribute about £25 billion to our economy in many different ways. It is summed up best by chief economist for Danske Bank, Angela McGowan, who said:

"This latest report by the Commissioner's Office shines a bright light on the true value of older people to both our economy and ... society as a whole. By providing a greater understanding of the direct and indirect benefits of older people this report both progresses us socially and provides older people with recognition for their extensive economic contribution."

Despite that, we still have prejudice in our community, and another vital contribution to tackling this will be the OFMDFM older persons' strategy, Active Ageing. That is a positive step which presents a real opportunity for government to increase participation and ensure the care and protection of older people in our community. We also have the important work of Age NI, the Age Sector Platform and the Pensioners Parliament, which provide vital advocacy for older people in our community. There is vital intergenerational work as well by organisations like Linking Generations —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: — and I think that this report is another important contribution to ensuring that older people are valued in our community.

Mr Anderson: At the outset, I declare an interest in the cross-party motion before us as I am a member of that illustrious over-60s club. I am proud to be in the age group to which this report refers.

A Member: How far are you into it?

6.30 pm

Mr Anderson: We will not go into that, but my party colleagues would have been disappointed had I not referred to that. They are always reminding me of that, not only in the House but outside it. They should maybe learn to respect their elders.

[Laughter.]

On a more serious note, I am greatly encouraged by the report of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland on the subject of appreciating age. It is timely and helpful. It ought to be warmly welcomed by all, and I am glad to see that that is the case in the House.

We live in a rapidly changing society. People over 60 still have much to offer society in many ways. What they lack in youth and youthful vigour, they more than make up for in experience. As the report highlights, people over the age of 60 contribute in a great variety of ways, socially and economically. In the words of the commissioner:

"The evidence in this report will help to challenge negative attitudes towards ageing and highlight the very positive difference that older people make to our quality of life and our economy."

We now live longer and, generally, healthier lives. Life expectancy has increased by 11 years since 1950. The number of older people living in Northern Ireland is set to rise significantly. According to the report, the number of older people living in Northern Ireland will increase by 86.9% over the next 50 years, and they will then represent one third of the population. In that light, it is right and fitting that the Assembly acknowledge older people's positive contribution and lead from the front in promoting it.

The stand-out headline from the commissioner's report is, no doubt, the fact that older people in Northern Ireland are set to contribute almost £25 billion to the economy over the next 50 years in a variety of ways. That totally demolishes the myth that older people are nothing but a drain on a country economically. The figures are clearly set out in the report. It is full of detailed statistics and projected figures on the anticipated contribution from the over-60s during the next 50 years. I will not simply repeat what is in the report, but it is interesting to note the range and variety of these contributions.

Such contributions can be seen in the business world. In many SMEs, for example, which are the backbone of our local economy, senior members of a family firm are likely to keep their hand on the tiller for much longer than was the case a few years ago. In the public sector, those who have given many years of dedicated service to society are now able to work on well beyond the age of 60, health permitting. In doing so, they set a fine example to younger staff by giving added value to the overall performance of the Civil Service and its delivery of front-line services.

Older people are also engaged in many roles in the voluntary, community and charity sectors, where their skills and experience are invaluable in helping others. We are all well aware of the significant contribution that older people make through caring, which enables loved ones, relatives or friends to live a dignified life at home for longer, thus also saving the health service millions of pounds every year. Grandparents play a crucial and growing childminding role. Indeed, grandparents, who have always been

important in family life, are now key figures in the family, often childminding out of love and seeking no financial reward.

Those are just some of the vital and positive contributions that the over-60s in Northern Ireland provide now and will provide to an ever-increasing degree in the years to come. The report presents a positive picture for the over-60s. It tackles negative perceptions head-on and clearly highlights the key roles that older people continue to play in the community and family in so many ways across Northern Ireland.

I will conclude, as Mr Lyttle did, with the words of the chief economist for Danske Bank, Angela McGowan:

"This latest report by the Commissioner's Office shines a bright light on the true value of older people to both our economy and NI society as a whole."

I agree entirely with that and wholeheartedly commend the motion to the House today.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat. I am grateful to be afforded the opportunity to respond to the motion. Junior Minister Bell and I welcome research of this kind, and, indeed, we attended the launch of the report on 1 October in the MAC in Belfast. It was a very informative and well-supported event.

When the First Minister and deputy First Minister were taking legislation through the Assembly to create the office of the Commissioner for Older People, they felt it critical that promoting positive attitudes towards older people should be a major part of the role of the commissioner. In fact, the Commissioner for Older People Act 2011 places a legal obligation on the commissioner to do so. I know that Claire Keatinge and her team have worked tirelessly to bring issues facing our older population to the fore and to help to change attitudes to this valuable and diverse section of our community.

The publication of the report is particularly relevant given the changes in population here. Over the 10-year period between 2002 and 2012, the number of adults aged 65 and over increased by 20%.

The trend is expected to continue, and the number of people in that age group is projected to increase by 12% between 2012 and 2017 and by 64% between 2012 and 2032.

It is good news for all of us. It means that people should be able to enjoy an active life for longer and be able to share their skills, knowledge and experience with the rest of the population. We all gain from the contribution of older people to society. However, too often, the discussion on this topic focuses solely on greater pension and health and social care costs. That is a highly imbalanced and inaccurate picture and feeds prejudice against older people. We do face challenges in those areas, but the central fact is that, as a society, we greatly benefit from people living longer and contributing longer.

That should be the starting point for any discussion about what is referred to as the "ageing population". For example, the size of our working-age population is declining,

yet many people in their 50s who need to change jobs or their career to continue working to support their family are unable to do so because older workers can be particularly disadvantaged owing to unfair attitudes about their ability to work. That could become an even greater problem in the future as the state pension age rises. People with decades of experience and many skills could become benefit claimants for many years before getting their pension, and we need to tackle ageist attitudes wherever they are found.

The focus on costs in discussions about people living longer implies that the key factor in getting older is that people become ill, frail and dependent. The reality is that the great majority of older people are living healthier and active lives. That is an issue that many older people feel strongly about. During the recent consultation on the draft Active Ageing strategy, many people expressed anger about the ageism, discrimination and disrespect that older people experience. It is a prejudice that some people feel no qualms about expressing, and that should not be tolerated in any society. It is very important that we challenge prejudice and ensure that people are aware of the very significant contribution that our older people make to society.

Additionally, research has shown that holding negative attitudes towards ageing when people are younger may cause poorer health for those people when they in turn reach old age, and it may even lead to a shorter life. The prejudice becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so it is in all our interests to view the entire life course as the positive, fulfilling journey that it can be.

We need to instil respect in our communities for the older population: people who have often worked all their life, raised a family and supported others. As well as the financial contribution that our older people make to the economy, we need to recognise their non-financial contributions as well. There are many examples of our older people providing valuable services to the community. They have high levels of membership and leadership of many local organisations, groups and societies, and they also share their time, skills and knowledge through volunteering. Indeed, Minister Bell and I had the pleasure of hearing Mary Scally, at the launch of the report at the MAC, talk about her experience of volunteering and the many hours that she is giving to many volunteer programmes and projects, from which she gets a lot back.

Mr Ramsey: She is from Derry.

Ms J McCann: She is from Derry. That is right, Pat.

By being active users or customers of community-based facilities and resources such as local shops, post offices and libraries, older people are supporting the viability of local services. They also play a central role in contributing to childcare. Grandparents are often unpaid childcare workers who enable parents to work. Older people vote in much greater numbers than those in other age groups, supporting the democratic process. Although those things cannot be quantified in cash terms, they are no less valuable and vital and must be recognised as such.

We acknowledge the many contributions made by older people to our society, but we

must not lose sight of the significant challenges faced by some. Too many older people are living in social disadvantage and poverty, particularly fuel poverty. As part of the development of the Active Ageing strategy, which we are currently finalising, we have strategic aims to address those issues, and we will work with Departments to develop the outcomes that we want to achieve. We have also worked with Departments to develop signature programme proposals under the Delivering Social Change framework. The programmes are designed to complement the existing programmes, policies and services of all Departments that have primary responsibility for tackling these issues.

We need to recognise that individuals' personal circumstances will impact on how ageing affects them. For example, people from minority ethnic communities may have particular experiences and needs, especially around language issues, obtaining information about services that they are entitled to, discrimination and feelings of isolation. Older women who have remained at home or worked part-time owing to caring responsibilities may have less pension income than men as they will not have built up as much of a personal employer's pension, and they may live in poverty and fuel poverty as a consequence.

Fear of crime is another major issue of concern to older people. More generally, it is important to stress that, for some older people but not all, living longer can also mean living longer with illness, disability or a dependency on others. The benefits of living longer will only be realised if we recognise and respond to both the challenges and opportunities that it brings. In order to do that, we must first listen to older people and discover precisely what services and policies they want and are entitled to have in place. We must then involve older people in their delivery so that those services can change to meet their needs.

Over the years, the Executive's policies have focused on the health and social care needs and inequalities faced by the growing number of older people in our society. While we need to continue to support the proportion of older people who have health needs, we also need to recognise that older people are changing and are living more active and fulfilling lives.

In order to address the challenges to people fulfilling their potential in later life, we are, as I said, in the process of finalising the active ageing strategy. We will continue to work with our ageing strategy advisory group, which includes, as members, older people and representatives from organisations with expertise in this area. At our request, the Commissioner for Older People chairs that group. The strategy's vision for the North is to be an age-friendly region in which people, as they age, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential with their rights respected and their dignity protected.

I very much welcome the research that has been published in this area, which highlights the very positive contribution that older people make to our society. I encourage everyone to strongly challenge ageism wherever and whenever they encounter it. It is

critical that we recognise our debt to older people for all their support and expertise and for the leadership that they have shown us. I am sure that there is not one person in the House tonight who does not have a grandparent or an elderly aunt, uncle, mother or father who they have gained from and used as a role model. It is very important that this motion has all-party support tonight.

Mr Dickson: I suppose that I need to declare an interest as well: I know that none of you can imagine that I am actually over 60, but, as the motion makes reference to it, indeed I am. I am living proof that you can look a lot younger.

This has been a very positive and welcome debate. I will briefly run through the contribution of all Members who spoke. Pat Ramsey reminded us at the beginning, as has just been referenced, that this is an all-party motion and that it is important that the voices of older people be heard and celebrated and that their contribution be noted. That could be through volunteering, and he made particular reference to volunteers at the City of Culture. I do not know whether he remembers, but I remembering seeing a short news piece, probably on the BBC, which interviewed a number of the older volunteers who were acting as city guides during the City of Culture events. What stuck in my mind was their positivity and eagerness and their delight that somebody had recognised that there was value in the job that they were doing as volunteers.

Peter Weir definitely dug a very deep hole, certainly with Jo-Anne Dobson at least, if not with a few others in the Chamber. He mentioned the cross-party support for the motion and for the positive contribution that older people make. He specifically mentioned the facts and figures contained in the report, as did others. He particularly made reference to the need for respect for those who are of an older age.

Bronwyn McGahan told us that the report reframed the debate on the value of older people and how we should invest in them. She said that communities should be great places to grow old in, and I thought that that was a very important comment for the Assembly to make: every corner of Northern Ireland should be a place in which people should be valued in growing older.

Jo-Anne Dobson referred to the value of people who volunteer in a whole range of styles and activities and with a raft of organisations across the community. She referred to those of us who might be described as baby boomers, perhaps better educated than the previous generation, and the positive impact that we, they and older people can make to this society in giving back some of our life and work experiences. However, some of us do not see our work careers as being over for a very long time yet.

6.45 pm

Sydney Anderson fessed up to being in the over-60 club with some of us. He also welcomed the report and told us that it had much to offer. He referenced the key figure of the £25 billion contribution that it made to tackling negative perceptions.

Chris Lyttle commended the commissioner's report to us as well, particularly the benefits of an ageing workforce and the importance of how we focus, quite often, on young people being unemployed rather than the employment pressures on those who

are 50-plus who perhaps have not been reskilled to meet the needs of a growing workforce and of encouraging employers to ensure that they value older workers. He also referred to the value of volunteers, as many have done. He mentioned in particular the work of people like Kinship Care and their contribution to society.

The junior Ministers are both present, with Jennifer McCann speaking today. They welcomed the report. They noted that the role of Commissioner for Older People had been brought into existence by the Assembly and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. She cited it as an important role that was brought into being by the Assembly and delivers for older people in the community, which, I think, has to be described as a positive step forward among the many things that we do not see as very positive in the Chamber. Again, she referred to all the activities that older people do to contribute to our community and to various organisations across the community, particularly in supporting local services. Many get involved in campaigns, such as saving local libraries and things like that, because, very often, they are the backbone of the community.

The Minister also made an interesting reference to those who are in isolation, particularly ethnic minorities. As people who come from an ethnic minority continue to live in Northern Ireland, they will also grow old with us here. We have to make special provision and note how people from an ethnic minority background should be looked after and cared for in our community and that they, too, have a contribution to make to society in Northern Ireland. I watched the Commissioner for Older People's video and the contribution that was made by one particular gentleman.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate tonight. I do not want to bore people with the facts and figures that we have already gone through, but there are perhaps one or two things that I would like to say by way of conclusion. We have referred to all the things that people do. I would like to highlight in particular the volunteers who work hard in community organisations across the Province. Churches perhaps are neglected when it comes to that reference. There is not a church in Northern Ireland that could operate in the way in which it does or make a contribution to communities, towns and villages across Northern Ireland if it were not for the contribution of older people.

We know the amount of money that older people can put back into the community. That is very important.

The report asks us to appreciate age. We must ask ourselves how we recognise the positive contribution of older people. It is often said that a way of measuring a society is by looking at how it treats its older people. The reality is that the day will come when, after all those years of paying taxes, volunteering and caring for others, many older people will themselves come to depend on the state to reciprocate with quality community transport, access to community services and perhaps even excellent nursing and health care. I have taken a particular interest in the latter that is in part due to the failings of facilities in my constituency. I must say that we have been found wanting at times in the care of older people in this community.

In my opinion — I believe that this is backed by recent reports — while the majority of those who care for older people do an outstanding job, we could do a lot more with regard to robust oversight and protection to ensure the best care for them when they come to the time of life when they, in turn, need to be cared for. That would be one way of recognising the positive contribution that they make by saying this: you have served our society, and now we will serve you by ensuring that your last years are spent in comfort, peace and dignity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland's Report, 'Appreciating Age', which places an economic value on the wide and varied contributions made by the over-60s across Northern Ireland; acknowledges the positive contributions made by older people through caring, childcare, volunteering, replacement parenting and working; and will seek to challenge negative perceptions around older age in order to make Northern Ireland a better place to grow old.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment