

# Programme for Government draft outcomes framework consultation

Response from the Commissioner for Older People for  
Northern Ireland

March 2021

## Role of the Commissioner

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) is an independent voice and champion for older people whose legal powers and duties are defined by the Commissioner for Older People (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. This is a statutory role, to safeguard and promote the interests of older people in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to engage with the consultation on the *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework*. Moreover, I commend the ambition stated in the Foreword to the Consultation Document to facilitate *‘[A]n inclusive society in which people of all ages and backgrounds are respected and supported. A society which has no barriers to people living prosperous and fulfilling lives.’*

## Context and introduction

### **Older People – A First Level ‘Outcome’ NOT A Second Level ‘Priority Area’**

However, I was very disappointed to see no specific Outcome addressing the needs of older people. The draft Framework includes two ‘Key Priority Areas’ dedicated to older people, under two Outcomes: ‘We all enjoy long, healthy active lives’; and ‘We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives’. Yet, as the Consultation Document itself makes clear:

*A key feature of the approach is that the design and content of work plans will be directly dependent on the contribution they make towards helping achieve one or more of the desired Outcomes within the Framework.*

The implications for older people of such an approach is far-reaching as regards public policy. Under this approach, Government and statutory bodies would, in the delivery of their services, inevitably prioritise the first level duties

of the PfG's Outcomes over the second level duties contained in the Key Priority Areas.

In this scenario, public bodies, when developing and assessing their service provision would primarily attend to Outcomes rather than the 'bullet points' of Key Priority Areas. In effect with these proposals, the needs of older people would be of secondary concern for those charged with delivering services to them within Northern Ireland.

Without a distinct PfG Outcome to explicitly address the needs of older people, their concerns will not be given the highest level of official and public attention in areas such as health and social care, housing, transport and community development. To resolve the potential implications of this approach, I urge the Executive to include a PfG Outcome to explicitly address the needs of older people.

### **The Need for an Older People's Outcome**

Having outlined what would be the implications of the absence of an older people's PfG Outcome, it is important to outline the advantages of specifically including older people within Government's list of top-level priorities. PfG Outcomes are statements as to the nature of society we want to live in, and how we might progress towards realising these ambitions. In its own words: *The Executive's approach to the Programme for Government begins with a draft Framework of Outcomes – statements of societal wellbeing which, taken together, are intended to capture the range of things that experience and research suggest matter most to people...*

While all sections of society have been hit hard during the current pandemic, older people are among those who have experienced its most damaging impacts, the full consequences of which are still to be seen. The disproportionate, negative impacts experienced by older people during this

crisis, highlight more than ever, the need for specific interventions to tackle the issues facing this section of society. However, the practical interventions required to address the hardships which have fallen heaviest upon older people require a policy foundation, such as that articulated as ‘Outcomes’ in the Programme for Government.

A similarly compelling argument for the inclusion of such an Outcome is the changing demographic of the Northern Ireland population; by 2043, over 24% of people here will be over 65.<sup>1</sup> There are more older people than ever before, and this large, growing section of society will require appropriate, often adapted, service provision. Older people, often, though not always, share distinct health, social and economic commonalities and, will need distinct or increased service provision. The distinctive profile of older people in Northern Ireland includes:

- Experiencing a ‘higher risk of mortality and... isolation due to restrictions on visits from family members, resulting in deterioration in mental and physical health’ during the current pandemic;<sup>2</sup>
- Increased frequency of a long term or life-limiting health condition;<sup>3</sup>
- Experiencing high levels of exclusion from in-person and online public and private services during the current pandemic;<sup>4</sup>
- An absence of legal protection from age discrimination in relation to the provision of goods, facilities and services;<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 2018-based Population Projections for Northern Ireland, NISRA, 2019

<sup>2</sup> *How Coronavirus has Affected Equality and Human Rights*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020, p.6

<sup>3</sup> 52% of people aged 75 and over have a limiting long-term condition, *Health Survey (NI) First Results 2019/20*, DoH, 2020, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> ‘These groups [older and disabled people] are therefore potentially further excluded from accessing key services, whether that be public services or online shopping for essential goods’ (*How Coronavirus has Affected Equality and Human Rights*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020, p.9).

<sup>5</sup> The Executive’s paper *New Decade, New Approach* states: ‘an Age, Goods, Facilities and Services Bill should also be brought forward by the Executive as basis for ensuring that no one is discriminated against because of their age.’ No legislation is currently in place.

- Poorer police outcomes for crimes such as burglary, criminal damage, vehicle theft and violence without injury;<sup>6</sup>
- Significantly lower levels of economic activity.<sup>7</sup>

These group characteristics highlight precisely why an older people's PfG Outcome is necessary; policy and practice as developed across Government and statutory bodies, must if it is to achieve 'societal wellbeing', consider those most in need. Rationally, a section of society, soon to be a quarter of the population, which has the greatest health needs and least economic potential must feature at the highest level of service provision planning. Without an explicit older people's PfG Outcome, progress towards 'societal wellbeing' is unlikely because workplans/service provision will be based on priorities which exclude a sizeable, at-risk part of our society - older people.

In summary, to address the problem of unequal service provision for older people you must first acknowledge that problem exists; in this case, by incorporating older people into the list of high-level priorities.

### **A Well-Balanced Society**

The Northern Ireland Executive's *Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2022* defines its vision for Northern Ireland as: *Being an age friendly region in which people, as they grow older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential; with their rights respected and their dignity protected.*

The inclusion in the *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework* of the Outcome: 'Our children and young people have the best start in life' is very welcome. This Outcome will no doubt provide an underpinning for policy and practice which supports our children in their formative years. However, the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland*, COPNI, 2019, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Working age is defined as 16-64 and therefore statistics for those in older cohorts are unavailable, see *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, NISRA, March 2021.

absence of an Outcome which protects older people in a similar manner represents a symbolic and substantial failure to promote the Executive's vision to create 'an age friendly region in which people as they grow old are valued and supported'.

## **Conclusion**

COPNI has a growing caseload addressing public service issues pertaining to health and social care, housing, transport and crime. Over the past year, among others, housing and welfare staff engaged with my office have indicated that given the financial constraints on them, their services are unable to fully meet the needs of older people.

In a context in which the needs of older people are increasingly being relegated, I strongly urge that the highest priority be given to the needs of this grouping in the form of a specific PfG Outcome. It is only when Government states unequivocally that this area is a top-level priority that substantial progress towards greater social equality for older people might be achieved.



Commissioner for **Older People**  
for Northern Ireland