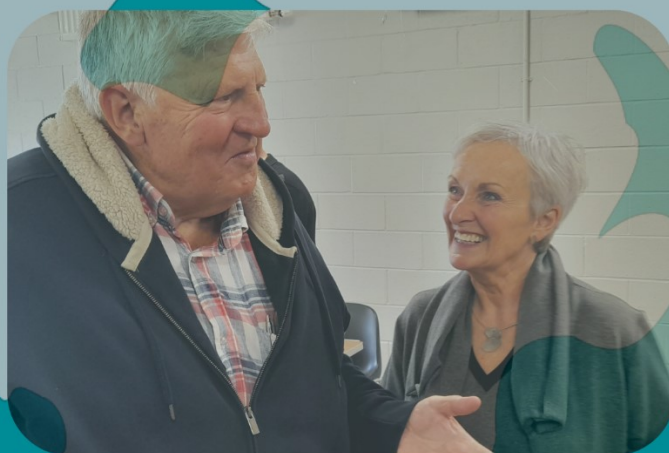


# COPNI

Commissioner for Older People  
for Northern Ireland



## Advancing Age-Friendly Practice in Northern Ireland:

Supporting Collaboration, Impact and Sustainability  
of Age Sector Organisations



Commissioner for **Older People**  
for Northern Ireland

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*“The community approach to delivering health and social care to our older people is an excellent example of what can be achieved when local services come together... I see this as an example of best practice, which I would like to see rolled out across Northern Ireland, to become common practice in how we deliver healthcare and support to an ageing population.”*

– Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, on the services provided by age sector organisation Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP)

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## FOREWORD

Together, we must ensure that older people can age well and remain connected, supported, and included in their communities. To achieve this, we need to start delivering on our promise of strategic planning to support an ageing population.<sup>1</sup> This process should include an appropriate response to strategy development and the design of public services.

In this publication, as Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI), I call for a more focussed and coordinated approach to supporting citizens to age well. As a first step in planning for the needs of an ageing population, it is important to recognise the barriers to transformational change. The transformation required will mean a reassessment of how our public services work and how our public realm is designed.<sup>2</sup> This medium to long-term planning will require time, sustained investment, and cross-departmental collaboration. However, this publication seeks to highlight what can be done now to develop Northern Ireland's strategic response, and to generate immediate impact. Through my engagement with stakeholders working in age policy, and those delivering services in the age sector, I have compiled some practical proposals below that can immediately start the process of meeting the needs of an ageing society.

The World Health Organization's age-friendly framework is used to focus discussion within this report.<sup>3</sup> The WHO's guidance sets an international standard for age-inclusive communities. Northern Ireland's most recent Active Ageing Strategy references this framework.<sup>4</sup> Across Northern Ireland, voluntary and community organisations, known as age sector networks (ASNs), work collaboratively to promote age-friendly practice. The Public Health Agency also funds age-friendly coordinator roles in each council. Collectively, these age-friendly stakeholders have come together as part of the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI) to promote age-friendly practice. These stakeholders have the capacity to deliver strategic change through their strong foundation of knowledge and service-delivery.

<sup>1</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>2</sup> COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning. The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

<sup>4</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

This report does not call for a radical redesign of services. Instead, it calls for a more focussed acknowledgement by government of what has come before, what works, and what can be improved. For example, the Active Ageing Strategy sets out to address the needs of older citizens in Northern Ireland. However, while the strategy references the WHO's age-friendly practice, it does not use the framework to categorize its intervention.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, each of the councils use the WHO's age-friendly framework and thus, their activities are more tightly focussed on age-friendly practice. Among other benefits, if future iterations of the Active Ageing Strategy adopted the WHO framework, collaboration between local and Northern Ireland-level stakeholders would likely be more efficient and more effective.

Northern Ireland has a broad range of vibrant groups dedicated to supporting older citizens. The Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland seeks to present a coordinated voice for older people from across society. The organisations that make up the network all have experience of supporting older people and can therefore provide rich insight into what is working, and what needs to be developed. Government should work with this forum to increase its capacity and to help scale up best practice. This process can lead to a range of sector-led interventions that support older people in the places in which they live.

Included in this report are recommendations aimed at promoting efficiencies in strategy development and delivery. Other recommendations highlight the importance of a sustainable age sector to deliver impactful support to older people. Effective strategy, and support for existing interventions and groups should both be considered integral to the public sector response to an ageing population.

In this report, the social and economic value of the age sector is demonstrated in the services provided by age sector networks. These ASNs offer impactful local services, certain models are integrated into health services, and some already demonstrate value for money. The age sector, however, also faces significant challenges. Much of the community-led support for older people faces sustainability issues in the immediate term. Therefore, the Northern Ireland Executive should consider the potential of the age sector in its strategic planning for an ageing population.<sup>6</sup> The current level of age sector provision should not be taken for granted, and the sector should be supported to become more resilient.

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

<sup>6</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

This report is not a call to duplicate or replace statutory services. It is a call for partnership: to recognise the vital contribution of local experts and community-based approaches. It is a call to strengthen existing age-friendly efforts, and to embed these in strategic delivery. With careful planning, targeted support, and a shared ambition to make Northern Ireland more age-friendly, we can develop a system of support that reflects the realities of people's lives in a way that helps older people live with dignity, connection, and purpose.

This publication evidences the need to better support older people in Northern Ireland. It suggests that the current policy response is not appropriate and advocates for greater alignment with the WHO age-friendly framework. It also powerfully outlines the social and economic case for the development of the AFNNI, scaling up of ASN best practice, and support for the age sector.

**Siobhan Casey**

*Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this publication, the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) evidences the need for strategic planning to support Northern Ireland's older, and ageing population. The report acknowledges that strategic planning will require time, resource, and sustained efforts from all government departments. It therefore advocates that the government understands and makes best use of the infrastructure and expertise that is already in place in Northern Ireland.

Much of the infrastructure that already exists in Northern Ireland is aligned to the World Health Organization's (WHO) age-friendly framework. The WHO framework seeks to:

*“foster healthy and active ageing by building and maintaining intrinsic capacity across the life course and enabling greater functional ability in someone with a given level of capacity”.<sup>7</sup>*

Existing age-friendly infrastructure includes the Department for Communities' (DfC) Active Ageing Strategy, which incorporates aspects of age-friendly terminology. At the local level, each council has separate age-friendly strategies, and age-friendly coordinators. There are also independent organisations, known collectively as age sector networks (ASNs), that promote age-friendly practice through their services in each council area. The above stakeholders contribute to the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI), which also includes COPNI, Age NI, the DfC and the Public Health Agency. Government should consider increasing its engagement with this network of age-friendly stakeholders as a next step in its strategic planning. The AFNNI already possesses a good understanding of what works in different localities, and what else is needed, based on how older people engage with their services.

This report offers an overview of the age sector landscape, ultimately suggesting that the current level of intervention to support older people does not go far enough to meet their needs. The report first identifies where need exists mapped against the WHO age-friendly framework.<sup>8</sup> It then assesses Northern Ireland's current strategic approach to supporting older people, the Active Ageing Strategy, and offers recommendations as to how the strategy can be developed to better support the government's efforts to plan

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<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [Age-friendly in practice](#).

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).



for an ageing population.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the report demonstrates the valuable contribution of age sector organisations, and the challenges they face when supporting older people. COPNI calls for greater acknowledgement from government of the role of the age sector in supporting older people, and for increased collaboration between the sector and government.

Overall, the report's narrative has three core elements. First, while it is positive that there is political consensus regarding the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population, transformation takes time, and Northern Ireland's challenging budget context will likely limit the speed, and quality of service transformation. Second, there is an opportunity to build upon Northern Ireland's existing age-friendly infrastructure as part of strategic planning, learning and scaling up of good practice, and introducing efficiencies in processes. This would make best use of existing resources, would better support older people immediately, and would better inform longer-term planning. Third, the age sector in Northern Ireland can contribute to strategic planning and service delivery. Organisations are already providing cost-effective services that are aligned to good practice, albeit with constrained resources and in the context of funding uncertainty.

COPNI proposes a series of recommendations below. Each recommendation is intended to support the government in developing a responsive, community-based solution to an ageing population in the immediate term. This process can develop alongside the larger, long-term project of public service transformation necessary for an ageing population.<sup>10</sup> Each recommendation aims to support strategic public service design and delivery, and to make best use of resources that are already available in the age sector ecosystem.

**Recommendation 1: The Executive Office should clarify how it aims to progress the motion passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly acknowledging the importance of strategic planning to prepare for an ageing population.**

A motion recognising the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2025.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that any government action in this area will overlap with existing efforts to support older people.

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<sup>9</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>10</sup> COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning. The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

<sup>11</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

Clarity should therefore be provided on what the Executive Office intends to do in the current government mandate, and what it will mean for the age-friendly infrastructure that already exists.

**Recommendation 2: The Executive Office should engage with the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI), to develop its approach to strategic planning.**

The AFNNI was launched in 2019 and has a membership of age-friendly coordinators from all eleven council areas, alongside representatives from the ASNs, Department for Communities, Public Health Agency (PHA), Age NI, and COPNI. The mission of the network is to enhance age-friendly connections across Northern Ireland by advocating for inclusive policies, promoting awareness, ensuring equal access to services, and empowering communities through engagement and support.<sup>12</sup> The AFNNI has working groups for strategic areas, such as housing, transport, and resourcing the age sector. By engaging with this network, the Executive Office can develop a strategic approach to an ageing population that draws on the extensive expertise of the sector.

Importantly, the Executive Office should collaborate with the AFNNI to produce a long-term plan to develop age sector organisations and address the challenges they face. Informed by the expertise of several age sector groups, the AFNNI can help determine how to scale up proven interventions to achieve cost-effective and immediate impact.

**Recommendation 3: The Department for Communities should deliver a fully resourced, cross-departmental update to the Active Ageing Strategy, grounded in evaluation.**

The sole government strategy in place to address older people's needs holistically is the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022. Despite inadequacies in the current Active Ageing Strategy, it was announced in 2025 that its existing framework will not change, and that the strategy will be renewed as an action plan at a future date. COPNI has

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<sup>12</sup> Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (n.d.) [Age Friendly Network NI](#).

received no assurances that pre-existing issues identified in consultation processes, or previous evaluations, will be addressed in the action plan update.<sup>13 14 15 16</sup>

COPNI maintains that it is inappropriate to renew the strategy in its current form. In its 2021 consultation response, COPNI noted that “the Strategy is more a reporting of positive initiatives impacting older people since 2016, [rather] than what it should be: a rigorous framework”. To be effective, the Active Ageing Strategy must include:

- Appropriate resource and funding allocation tethered to the strategy’s proposed outcomes;
- The allocation of responsibilities within the strategy to government departments;
- A strong relationship between strategic outcomes and departmental actions; and
- Quantifiable and timebound objectives.<sup>17</sup>

The current report highlights the pressing need to support the age sector in Northern Ireland. The renewed Active Ageing Strategy should be remodelled to meet the level of need described. Appropriate resource allocation and cross-departmental responsibilities should be a key part of a remodelled Active Ageing Strategy.

**Recommendation 4: The Active Ageing Strategy should adopt the World Health Organization’s age-friendly framework to facilitate a more coordinated approach to population ageing.**

The WHO age-friendly framework sets out the needs of an ageing population against eight “domains” of age-friendly practice.<sup>18</sup> While the WHO age-friendly framework informs the Active Ageing Strategy, the age-friendly domains are not used to structure the

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<sup>13</sup> There have been two formal consultations on the development of the Active Ageing Strategy. The first consultation in 2014 addressed the development of the original strategy. The second consultation in 2016 offered an opportunity to provide feedback on the strategy’s annual indicators. See Department for Communities, [Consultations](#).

<sup>14</sup> The DfC provided an update in 2020 that outlined progress against its already established indicators, Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2022](#).

<sup>15</sup> Co-design for the strategy’s update commenced in 2021. In July 2022, the Department stated that ‘An evaluation of the Strategy has commenced, and a report will be published once the Strategy has concluded’, Department for Communities (2022) [Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2022](#).

<sup>16</sup> In January 2023, the DfC provided COPNI with an update on how the strategy review was progressing, noting that “COPNI’s response, responses from other stakeholders, the results of a public survey on Citizen Space, and updates on Strategy actions are being used to evaluate the outgoing Strategy”.

<sup>17</sup> COPNI (2021) [Consultation on the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

<sup>18</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

Active Ageing Strategy's interventions. In contrast, each of Northern Ireland's councils use the WHO domains in their age-friendly strategies.

By aligning the activities of the future Active Ageing Strategy to the WHO age-friendly framework, there are potential benefits:

- i) It would mean that the Public Health Agency, local councils, and DfC would be using consistent terminology and delivering intervention under the same framework.
- ii) There would be an opportunity to phase out council-level age-friendly strategies, to be replaced by shorter, needs-based action plans that sit under the DfC strategy. Shorter action plans that incorporate some replicable processes in their design would make local planning more efficient. Doing this would also help join-up the work completed in different localities, creating opportunities to increase collaboration, to reduce the duplication of service, and to increase accountability.
- iii) Departments would also be more likely to engage with local age-friendly coordinators if they knew their work was attached to a departmental strategy.

**Recommendation 5: The Public Health Agency should use its upcoming review of age-friendly practice as an opportunity to strengthen the community response to an ageing population.**

Age-friendly coordinators are funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA). The Age-friendly coordinators play a valuable role in coordinating council engagement with older people and in terms of planning within the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI).

An evaluation of age-friendly practice in Northern Ireland is timely given the legislature's acknowledgement that there is a need to prepare strategically for an ageing population.<sup>19</sup> In its review, the PHA should recognise that each council area has unique needs, and also that the responsibilities of each age-friendly coordinator will vary, depending on where the role sits within their respective council's departments, and the wider ecosystem of organisations supporting older people.

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<sup>19</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

The PHA should identify what factors facilitate effective engagement with local government officials and the age sector, and identify where barriers exist. Age-friendly coordinators should be supported to increase their influence and to facilitate their delivery of localised support for older people.

**Recommendation 6: The Department of Health should recognise the value of age sector organisations in supporting community-based models that reduce pressure on the health service.**

The Minister of Health has already acknowledged the success of initiatives like the Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership as best practice (see case study 3) and has called for similar services across Northern Ireland.<sup>20</sup> ASNs such as the Southern Age Well Network also demonstrate significant reach and value for money (see case study 2) while working in partnership with the health service. As part of healthcare transformation, and preparation for an ageing population, the Department of Health should explore how age sector organisations can help improve health outcomes for older people and reduce demand on statutory services. Interventions that are cost-effective and impactful should be scaled up across trusts.

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<sup>20</sup> Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (n.d) [Minister for Health calls for community model of best practice for ageing to be rolled out across Northern Ireland](#).

## INTRODUCTION

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) has a statutory duty to “promote an awareness of matters relating to the interests of older persons and of the need to safeguard those interests” and “keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for older persons by relevant authorities”.<sup>21</sup>

While COPNI recognises the government’s approach to strategic planning must be tailored to the specific context, needs and resources of Northern Ireland, there is significant value in exploring established international standards of best practice. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) framework for age-friendly has been used to inform the scope of this report. Age-friendly practice is intended to:

*“foster healthy and active ageing by building and maintaining intrinsic capacity across the life course and enabling greater functional ability in someone with a given level of capacity”.<sup>22</sup>*

In this publication, COPNI highlights the need to support our ageing population in Northern Ireland across the eight age-friendly domains (areas of strategic importance to an older population). The report offers feedback on the policy response by government to ageing in Northern Ireland and offers recommendations to support the development of a more strategic approach. The study proceeds to highlight examples of best practice delivery from age sector organisations offering intervention under the WHO age-friendly framework. To conclude, the report provides an overview of the challenges age sector organisations face, underscoring the importance of measures to increase the resilience of these organisations.

Through this report, COPNI seeks to:

- Evidence the need for intervention that supports older people in Northern Ireland, using the WHO framework;
- Highlight the importance of coordinated and well-resourced policy to strategically prepare for an ageing population;
- Demonstrate the value of age sector work across Northern Ireland; and

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<sup>21</sup> [Commissioner for Older People Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#).

<sup>22</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [Age-friendly in practice](#).

- Advocate for recognition and collaboration between government and local age sector infrastructure as part of Northern Ireland's strategic planning for an ageing population.

This report is intended to showcase the importance of working with, and learning from, the community-based approaches that currently deliver valuable services to citizens and to indicate how such approaches can be sustained and expanded. Of course, while the study uses age sector networks (ASNs) as examples of age sector infrastructure delivering age-friendly intervention, it is important to recognise the value of the entire age sector. This includes various organisations offering similar services not explicitly aligned with the age-friendly framework, and those offering more specialised support to older people. The examples herein are simply that—‘examples’—but they do serve to represent the extraordinary potential of the community sector to support our ageing population. Indeed, it is likely that within a context of effective collaboration between government and local communities, such examples could serve as models of delivery within a Northern Ireland-wide strategic plan for our ageing population.

As part of this research, COPNI held discussions with stakeholders supporting age-friendly service provision. Stakeholders included the Department for Communities' Active Ageing team, Age NI, eight ASNs, and seven age-friendly coordinators. Appendix 2 offers more details on research caveats and clarifications. Appendix 3 offers further detail on local age-friendly infrastructure in Northern Ireland.



## AGE-FRIENDLY INFRASTRUCTURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This publication seeks to demonstrate how existing approaches to implementing the WHO's age-friendly framework in Northern Ireland can be used to support strategic planning for an ageing population. Therefore, it is useful to set out the main stakeholders supporting age-friendly policy design and service provision in Northern Ireland. Stakeholders in the scope of this review include:

### Department for Communities' Active Ageing team

The Department for Communities (DfC) is responsible for the Active Ageing Strategy in Northern Ireland.<sup>23</sup> The Active Ageing Strategy is an Executive Strategy, meaning that a range of departments are expected to contribute to its delivery. The strategy includes commitments to make Northern Ireland an age-friendly region. As part of the Active Ageing Strategy, its delivery team helped launch the Age-Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI), which is discussed below.

### Age-friendly coordinators

Each council in Northern Ireland has an age-friendly coordinator, funded by the Public Health Agency. Age-friendly coordinators are responsible for the delivery of council-level age-friendly strategies, which are independent of the Active Ageing Strategy. While each council strategy is delivered against the WHO age-friendly framework, they are developed independently by each council. What department the age-friendly coordinators are placed in is at the discretion of each council, and their day-to-day tasks can vary depending on the local context. Age-friendly coordinators contribute to the AFNNI.

### Age sector networks

ASNs are networks of independent voluntary and community organisations that work together with the aim of supporting “a strong and connected age sector where older people feel included, supported, engaged and valued in an age-friendly society”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

<sup>24</sup> Age NI (2023) Age NI and Age Sector Networks – A Shared Strategy Framework 2023. Provided to COPNI by Age NI.

ASNs each have their own delivery and funding approach, but are connected through their commitment to age-friendly practice, and their membership of the AFNNI. ASNs are supported by Age NI. It is estimated that, as of September 2023, **ASNs in Northern Ireland support 15,000 older people and over 2,000 organisations working with older people.**<sup>25</sup>

### Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland

The AFNNI was launched in 2019 and has a membership of age-friendly coordinators from all eleven council areas, and representatives from the ASNs, DfC, PHA, Age NI, and COPNI. The mission of the network is to enhance age-friendly connections across Northern Ireland by advocating for inclusive policies, promoting awareness, ensuring equal access to services, and empowering communities through engagement and support.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Age NI (2024) Response to consultation on voluntary and community sector infrastructure support. Provided to COPNI by Age NI.

<sup>26</sup> Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (n.d.) [Age Friendly Network NI](#).

## EVIDENCING NEED FOR AGE-FRIENDLY INTERVENTION

In this chapter, COPNI evidences the need for intervention to support older people. Need is demonstrated in the eight areas of strategic importance set out within the WHO's age-friendly framework.<sup>27</sup> The government's sole strategy specifically aimed at meeting the needs of older citizens—the Active Ageing Strategy—is then briefly considered.<sup>28</sup> Finally, this chapter outlines how existing age-friendly infrastructure can be developed to more effectively meet the needs of an ageing population.

When discussing the current level of need, it is important to recognise that Northern Ireland's population is ageing, notably, at a faster rate than any other UK region. In 2022, one in four adults were of pension age. By 2040, this will increase to just over one in three. By 2070, one in every two adults will be of pension age.<sup>29</sup> As such, the government must consider what intervention is proportionate for such demand, in the immediate, and long-term.

A recent publication by COPNI outlines how interventions to address the needs of an ageing population have not been appropriately financed or prioritised across government to date.<sup>30</sup> COPNI has also highlighted the limited awareness of how institutional and political decisions disproportionately impact older people, particularly those who are more vulnerable.<sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> With the recognition from the legislature that there is a need to strategically plan for an ageing population<sup>33</sup>, there must be a proportionate, and updated, strategic response on the part of government. Inevitably, this will require an appropriate remodelling of the Active Ageing Strategy.

<sup>27</sup> Known as “domains” these include outdoor environments, transport and mobility, housing, social participation, social inclusion and non-discrimination, civic engagement and employment, communication and information, community and health services. World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

<sup>28</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2022](#).

<sup>29</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2022) [2020-Based Population Projections: Principal Projection](#).

<sup>30</sup> COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

<sup>31</sup> COPNI (2024) [Are you ageist: Older people's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>32</sup> While the evidence of need outlined in this section will not apply to all older people, the themes discussed relate broadly to the experience of ageing in Northern Ireland. Further resources, toolkits, and reading to support policy design and service intervention are available in World Health Organization (2017) [Age-friendly environments in Europe: A handbook of domains for policy action](#).

<sup>33</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on ‘Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population’. The motion states ‘[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...’. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

## Evidence of need across the WHO domains of age-friendly<sup>34</sup>

### i) *Outdoor environments – to plan and design the built environment and public spaces with older people in mind.*

In Northern Ireland, people aged fifty and over are consistently less likely to be active than other age groups.<sup>35</sup> Over a third of older people (36%) are not satisfied with walking infrastructure, five per cent higher than the general population.<sup>36 37</sup> Research highlights how decision-making, such as the removal of park benches to discourage antisocial behaviour, can impact older people's ability to navigate outdoor environments.<sup>38</sup> Improving older people's experience of outdoor environments is vital for their overall well-being. More participation in outdoor activities is linked with lower medical costs.<sup>39</sup>

The Department for Infrastructure's budget for 2024-25 highlights the challenges faced in government resourcing.<sup>40</sup> The department is maintaining a limited level of road maintenance and is removing funding for the annual programme of footway enhancements. COPNI has noted that such measures risk disproportionately impacting older people.<sup>41</sup>

Informed decision-making, awareness of local need, and understanding the barriers that older people face when accessing outdoor environments is needed for more effective planning. While there is a need for longer-term transformation, appropriately positioned seating, public toilets, and traffic lights are all forms of simple intervention that can support older people in the short to medium term.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

<sup>35</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2024) [Sports and physical activity](#).

<sup>36</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023) [Transport Accessibility Statistics Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>37</sup> Factors that impact footpaths include the increasing commercialisation of public spaces, and the increase in shared access with runners and bikes. Murtagh et al. (2021) [Planning for an ageing city: place, older people and urban restructuring](#).

<sup>38</sup> COPNI (2024) [Are you ageist? Older people's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>39</sup> Zhu (2024) [The effect of outdoor activities on the medical expenditure of older people: multiple chain mediating effects of health benefits](#).

<sup>40</sup> Department for Infrastructure (2024) [Section 75 Equality of Opportunity Screening Analysis Form](#).

<sup>41</sup> COPNI (2024) [COPNI response to Department for Infrastructure Budget 2024-25 Equality Impact Assessment Public Consultation](#).

<sup>42</sup> I'DGO (n.d.) [How does the outdoor environment affect older people's quality of life?](#)

- ii) *Transport and mobility – to promote safe, accessible, appropriate and reliable transport services and infrastructure for active living.*

The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland suggests that almost half (46%) of the population did not use bus services in 2021, and 53% did not use train services.<sup>43</sup> Barriers to accessing public transport were identified by the former Department for Regional Development and include poor network coverage and infrequent service, alongside fear that specific additional requirements will not be accommodated.<sup>44</sup> Evidence from more recent studies suggest that transport issues have persisted over time.<sup>45</sup>

- iii) *Housing – to provide adequate, accessible, safe and affordable housing, a continuum of housing choices and the opportunity to age in place.*

The housing concerns of older people, as identified by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), include adaptability of homes for future care needs, house accessibility, safety and security within the home and surrounding area, and affordability.<sup>46</sup> The most recent House Condition Survey highlights the barriers that older people experience, suggesting that they face higher maintenance costs than the rest of the population, and are more likely to live in unfit homes.<sup>47</sup>

Wider evidence highlights that current trends in housing supply are detrimentally impacting older people. Current urban planning in Belfast, for example, prioritises student and commercial projects, which is linked to older people moving out of central locations, to areas with lower levels of service access.<sup>48</sup> Social housing waiting lists were longer in 2024, and the number of allocations lower, than at any previous stage.<sup>49 50</sup> An increase in private renting has been linked to higher rates of poverty among older demographics elsewhere in the UK.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Department for Infrastructure (2023) [Travel Survey for Northern Ireland \(TSNI\) in-depth report 2021](#).

<sup>44</sup> Department for Regional Development (2015) [Accessible Transport Strategy 2025 Stakeholder Engagement Emerging Issues](#).

<sup>45</sup> Department for Infrastructure (2021) [Sub Regional Transport Study](#).

<sup>46</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2019) [Housing and Older People: Housing Issues, Aspirations and Needs](#).

<sup>47</sup> Housing Executive (2016) [House Condition Survey](#).

<sup>48</sup> Murtagh et al. (2021) [Planning for an ageing city: place, older people and urban restructuring](#).

<sup>49</sup> COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

<sup>50</sup> The Northern Ireland Housing Executive notes that 16% of social housing applicants (6,056 people) in 2020 were older people. In total, 15% of this cohort received a housing allocation (988 people). Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2021) [Older People's Housing Strategy 2021/22 – 2026/27](#).

<sup>51</sup> Housing Today (2024) [Proportion of older people living in PRS to treble by 2040, CaCHE report finds](#).

iv) *Social participation – to promote older people’s participation in social life to combat loneliness and isolation.*

Evidence indicates that people aged 75 and older in Northern Ireland are more likely to feel lonely than other age groups.<sup>52</sup> They are also more likely to report lower levels of self-efficacy.<sup>53</sup> Lower levels of intergenerational living, and higher levels of social and geographical mobility, have contributed to increased social isolation and loneliness.<sup>54</sup> In Northern Ireland, people who engage in culture, arts, heritage and sport record higher levels of life satisfaction, higher levels of self-efficacy and lower levels of loneliness, while a higher proportion rate their health as ‘very good’ or ‘good’.<sup>55</sup>

v) *Social inclusion and non-discrimination – to create environments that are socially inclusive places, where all members of society are respected and have opportunities to participate and contribute.*

Addressing inequality across all protected characteristics<sup>56</sup> is important to the health of older people, as the negative impacts of inequality that are linked to other protected characteristics often become more pronounced as a person ages.<sup>57</sup> An older person’s material and financial resource; ability to access services; the likelihood of experiencing discrimination; and health, all impact social inclusion.<sup>58</sup> Evidence highlights that need exists in each of these areas in Northern Ireland. Age NI reported significant income concerns among older households in 2022/23.<sup>59</sup> Where a person lives, and transport accessibility have been highlighted as negatively impacting the lives of older people in

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<sup>52</sup> The Executive Office (2023) [Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23](#).

<sup>53</sup> The Executive Office (2023) [Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23](#).

<sup>54</sup> Devine and others. (2020) [Learning through practice: How can we address loneliness among older people?](#)

<sup>55</sup> NISRA (2025) [Wellbeing and engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland: Findings from the Continuous Household Survey 2023/24](#).

<sup>56</sup> Protected characteristics are set out in the Northern Ireland Act. Section 75 covers religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, sex, disability, and number of dependents. [Northern Ireland Act \(1998\)](#).

<sup>57</sup> Doebler and Glasgow (2016) [Relationships between deprivation and the self-reported health of older people in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>58</sup> Walsh and other (2017) [Social exclusion of older persons: a scoping review and conceptual framework](#).

<sup>59</sup> Age NI (2022) [All-Party Group on Ageing and Older People: The Cost-of-Living Crisis and Older People](#).

rural<sup>60</sup> and urban settings.<sup>61</sup> Older people are also less protected from discrimination in Northern Ireland than in other regions of the UK and Ireland.<sup>62 63</sup>

Public and societal respect for older people can mitigate occurrences of abuse against older people.<sup>64</sup> Yet research conducted by COPNI suggests that almost half of older people in Northern Ireland have felt discriminated against because of their age (49% of a 333-person survey). Testimonies provided by older people suggest that they often feel overlooked or are rushed in their interactions with other members of society. Older people also feel government decision-making doesn't take their additional needs into consideration.<sup>65</sup>

- vi) *Civic engagement and employment - to make better use of the potential of ageing societies by creating more and better opportunities for older people to engage in political, economic and public life, and to increase employment, social engagement and volunteering opportunities for older people.*

Increased engagement with older people on civic matters better informs intervention design,<sup>66</sup> thereby shaping age-friendly communities.<sup>67</sup> In 2023, 64% of respondents to Age NI's Lived Experience survey suggested that "listening to and engaging older people" ranked highest in importance among issues included under its "Communication and connection" theme.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Walsh, O'Shea, and Scharf (2019) [Rural old-age exclusion: a conceptual framework on mediators of exclusion across the lifecourse](#).

<sup>61</sup> Murtagh and others. (2022) [Age-friendly cities, knowledge and urban restructuring](#).

<sup>62</sup> BBC News (2022) [Equality campaigners call for change in NI age discrimination laws](#).

<sup>63</sup> COPNI has advocated for the introduction of age discrimination legislation in the provision of goods, facilities, and services in Northern Ireland since 2014. Despite commitments from the Northern Ireland Executive in 2015, there has been no legislative change to date. As a result, older people are less protected in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK and Ireland and continue to face age discrimination in their engagement with private business, public services, and in other aspects of life outside of the workplace. COPNI (2024) [Inquiry into Gaps in Equality Legislation](#).

<sup>64</sup> Taylor and others (2014) [Older People's Conceptualisation of Elder Abuse and Neglect](#).

<sup>65</sup> COPNI (2024) [Are you ageist? Older people's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>66</sup> Taylor and others. (2024) [Participation, autonomy and control are shared concepts within older people's interpretations of independence: a qualitative interview study](#).

<sup>67</sup> Murtagh and others (2022) [Age-friendly cities, knowledge and urban restructuring](#).

<sup>68</sup> Age NI (2023) [Lived Experience: What matters to older people](#).



Older people are less likely to volunteer than other age groups in Northern Ireland.<sup>69</sup> As such, there is clearly an opportunity to increase social participation via volunteerism. Encouraging volunteerism can have significant health benefits for older people<sup>70</sup> while also benefitting the economy.<sup>71</sup>

In terms of employment, the Department for the Economy (DfE) offers analysis of the challenges that older people face. DfE analysis indicates that 61% of people aged over fifty are economically inactive (n=418,000). Just under a third of this economically inactive demographic (31%, n=131,000) are between 50-64 years of age. Of this population, 57% no longer work due to long-term sickness (n=74,600), and 15% provide family and home care (n=19,600).<sup>72 73</sup>

Supporting employment among older people is essential as Northern Ireland's labour force is decreasing. Most of the change in total employment pre- and post-pandemic is attributed to people over 65 exiting the workforce. Without a significant intervention in labour force participation, Northern Ireland will face persistent labour shortages in the future.<sup>74</sup> Age-friendly employment initiatives are therefore strategically important for the economy. Such initiatives can support older people (and others with additional needs) to remain or return to the workforce, mitigating the impact of growing labour shortages.

*vii) Communication and information - to assist older adults in accessing timely, reliable, relevant and understandable information about their community, ways of engagement, available services and health topics through word of mouth, general press or the use of information technology.*

Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of internet non-users of all UK regions.<sup>75</sup> There is also a strong correlation between an ageing population, living in a rural area, and access and ability to use digital services. Older people highlight how online only services or material excludes people who do not use the internet.<sup>76</sup> People aged 65 and over are more likely to report no level of digital skill (55%) compared to the rest of the

<sup>69</sup> Older people volunteer, on average, less than other age groups, despite more older people being retired and working less. Department for Communities (2024) [Experience of volunteering by adults in Northern Ireland 2023/24](#).

<sup>70</sup> Increased volunteering by older people is associated with health benefits for these individuals. Volunteer Now (2013) [The Impact of Volunteering on the Health and well-being of the over 50s in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>71</sup> COPNI (2014) [Appreciating Age: Valuing the positive contributions made by older people in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>72</sup> Department for the Economy (2023) [Older People Inequalities in the Northern Ireland Skills System](#).

<sup>73</sup> Notably, Northern Ireland has had the highest levels of inactivity linked to sickness in the UK. Sickness is higher in areas more exposed to violence during the Troubles and is also linked with health waiting lists. Department for the Economy (2023) [Older people Inequalities in the Northern Ireland Skills System](#).

<sup>74</sup> Ulster University (2024) [Spare capacity in the Northern Ireland labour market – Paper 1](#).

<sup>75</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2021) [An overview of the Digital Divide in Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>76</sup> COPNI (2024) [Are you ageist? Older people's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland](#).

population (average 13% across other age groups).<sup>77</sup> In the State of the State report, which offers a view of the UK's public sector, it is suggested that ease of use was the second biggest concern for all adults (n=5,813) with regards public service digitisation in the UK, regardless of age.<sup>78</sup>

*“Postal drops are important. Everything is online or social media. A lot of older people don't know about events or consultations happening that are important to them.” – age-friendly coordinator*

- viii) *Community and health services - to promote and provide older adults with a broad range of well located, easily accessible health and community services.*

In Northern Ireland, public health services are free at the point of access. However, analysis from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) suggests that factors such as COVID-19 and an ageing population have led to significant waiting lists in Northern Ireland, and subsequent unmet care needs.<sup>79</sup> The Nuffield Trust projects an estimated growth of 0.6% in healthcare spending each year, based on population projections alone.<sup>80</sup>

Recommendations in the Systems not Structures (Bengoa) report highlighted that transformation is essential to address current resource pressures faced by the health service, and to meet the needs of an ageing population.<sup>81</sup> The Systems not Structures report notes that older people are the primary users of Northern Ireland's health service, and that the prevalence of disability, dependence and illness will increase with an ageing population. The profile of people requiring care has also grown more complex. As such, transformation recommendations include a reallocation of resource away from acute hospitals towards more preventative and community-based services.

Implementation of the recommendations included in the Systems not Structures report have been limited to date, due to an absence of government between January 2017 and January 2020, and February 2022 and January 2024; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and delivery of transformation on a year-to-year budget.<sup>82</sup> Overall, while the implications of population ageing are recognised in Department of Health reporting, a

<sup>77</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2025) [Digital Skills in Northern Ireland Tables](#).

<sup>78</sup> Deloitte (2022) [The State of the State 2022/23: From the pandemic to a cost of living crisis](#).

<sup>79</sup> The Economic and Social Research Institute (2022) [An analysis of the primary care systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland](#).

<sup>80</sup> New technology will also increase the rate of spend. In the last two decades, actual spending increased at a rate of 3.3% per year. Nuffield Trust (2022) [Future funding and current productivity in Northern Ireland's health and social care system](#).

<sup>81</sup> Bengoa et al. (2016) [Systems not structures: changing health and social care](#).

<sup>82</sup> Transformation Advisory Board (2021) [Comments on Draft Budget 2021/22 from the Transformation Advisory Board \(TAB\)](#).

reform of health services is a work in progress. Yet this transformation is necessary both for the sustainability of health services, and for ensuring that there is fair and equitable access to healthcare.<sup>83</sup>

## Age-friendly strategy in Northern Ireland

Thus far, this chapter has established the need that exists in each area of strategic importance to the development of age-friendly practice. Evidence across the eight WHO domains illustrate the complexity of issues faced by older people in our society. These issues are often interlinked. As such, it is vital that strategic intervention is coordinated across departments and not delivered in silos.

The remainder of this chapter assesses the existing age-friendly strategy in Northern Ireland. It offers a critique and, more importantly, advice as to how age-friendly strategy can be developed as part of Northern Ireland's planning for an ageing population.

The Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022 is Northern Ireland's most recent strategy aimed at supporting the needs of its older population. The vision of the Active Ageing Strategy is:

*“One of Northern Ireland 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”.<sup>84</sup>*

There have been two formal consultations on the development of the strategy. The first consultation in 2014 addressed the development of the original strategy. The second consultation in 2016 offered an opportunity to provide feedback on the strategy's annual indicators.<sup>85</sup> The DfC then provided an update in 2020 that outlined progress against its already established indicators.<sup>86</sup>

Co-design for the strategy's update commenced in 2021. The DfC has confirmed to COPNI that this 2021 process will inform future iterations of the strategy,<sup>87 88</sup> but that it was not part of a formal consultation.<sup>89</sup> The DfC also provided COPNI with an update

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<sup>83</sup> Existing GIS analysis suggests that, currently, in Northern Ireland, service access is linked with socioeconomic factors. Jo et al. (2021) [GIS mapping of healthcare practice: do older adults have equitable access to dental and medical care in the UK?](#)

<sup>84</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

<sup>85</sup> Department for Communities (n.d.) [Consultations](#).

<sup>86</sup> Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016 -2022](#).

<sup>87</sup> Department for Communities (2022) [Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2022](#).

<sup>88</sup> Department for Communities (n.d.) [Active Ageing](#).

<sup>89</sup> Clarification provided to COPNI from the DfC June 2025.

on how the strategy review was progressing in January 2023, noting that “COPNI’s response, responses from other stakeholders, the results of a public survey on Citizen Space, and updates on Strategy actions are being used to evaluate the outgoing Strategy”.<sup>90</sup> Most recently, in a plenary session in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 25 February 2025,<sup>91</sup> it was noted that based on:

*“Engagement and evidence that officials had gathered, it became apparent that the existing strategy framework remained appropriate. Therefore, the Communities Minister recently decided to retain the existing strategy, and to create a new action plan based on its framework.”*

– Junior Minister Aisling Reilly, Plenary Session, February 2025

This most recent update is concerning for three reasons.

**First, there is extensive need for better support for older people.** COPNI has evidenced this in previous sections. This evidence indicates that the current strategy is not sufficient as a standalone instrument to meet the longstanding need that exists – particularly in the context of an ageing population.

**Second, the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population has been recognised by legislators.**<sup>92</sup> This recognition from MLAs is a significant update in the policy landscape. Consequently, the above statement from Junior Minister Aisling Reilly on behalf of the Communities Minister, asserting that the existing strategy “remains appropriate”, should be reconsidered. With the acknowledgement by the Northern Ireland Assembly that there is a need for strategic planning, one must conclude that the current Active Ageing Strategy is inadequate for the needs of our ageing society.

**Third, despite the previous engagement listed above (two formal consultations in 2014 and 2016, and later co-design in 2021), there are concerns that stakeholder feedback has not been addressed meaningfully. This includes COPNI’s previous feedback, which highlighted several foundational flaws within the strategy.**<sup>93</sup> In 2021, COPNI stated that:

<sup>90</sup> Quotes from correspondence between COPNI and the DfC January 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2025) [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>92</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on ‘Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population’. The motion states ‘[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...’. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>93</sup> COPNI (2021) [Consultation on the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

*"The Strategy is more a reporting of positive initiatives impacting older people since 2016, [rather] than what it should be: a rigorous framework."*

To rectify this, COPNI recommended that an updated strategy includes:

- Specific funding allocation tethered to the strategy's proposed outcomes;
- The allocation of responsibilities within the strategy to government departments;
- A strong relationship between strategic outcomes and departmental actions; and
- Quantifiable and timebound objectives.

In light of these issues, it is concerning that the Active Ageing Strategy's existing framework has been deemed sufficient.<sup>94</sup> The 2014 consultation on the Active Ageing Strategy states that the DfC intended to publish sector feedback (paragraph 9.16).<sup>95</sup> The 2016 consultation also sets out the conditions of confidentiality among consultees, "The Freedom of Information Act gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority (in this case the Department). This includes access to information provided in response to a consultation exercise".<sup>96</sup> COPNI has been unable to locate any publications containing feedback from these consultation exercises in 2014, 2016 and 2021. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the basis upon which the government concluded that the current Active Ageing Strategy remains sufficient for our current needs.

In the absence of publication of stakeholder feedback or an evaluation document on the Active Ageing Strategy, COPNI maintains its existing position.<sup>97</sup> The original strategic framework of the Active Ageing Strategy is not a sufficient instrument in isolation to support older citizens. The Active Ageing Strategy should be redeveloped, with greater cross-departmental engagement, and with appropriate resources committed to support delivery.

A strategy that leverages existing infrastructure and scales up what works could have immediate and tangible benefits for older people. Several ways to assist the development of an Active Ageing Strategy that supports age-friendly practice, identified in consultation with age-friendly coordinators and age sector networks, are set out below.

<sup>94</sup> "[Through] engagement and evidence that officials had gathered, it became apparent that the existing strategy framework remained appropriate. Therefore, the Communities Minister recently decided to retain the existing strategy, and to create a new action plan based on its framework." Junior Minister Aisling Reilly, Plenary Session, 25 February 2025, Northern Ireland Assembly (2025) [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>95</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2014) [Active Ageing Strategy 2014 – 2020 – Consultation Document](#).

<sup>96</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2016) ['Active Ageing Strategy 2015 – 2021' Indicator Consultation Document](#).

<sup>97</sup> COPNI (2021) [Consultation on the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

### *Developing a strategy that introduces efficiencies to local council planning*

The age-friendly strategies of Northern Ireland's councils are aligned with the WHO domains for age-friendly practice,<sup>98</sup> and are delivered via the network of PHA funded age-friendly coordinators. Each council however develops an individual age-friendly strategy. If the DfC's new Active Ageing Strategy also opted to use the WHO domains for age-friendly practice to coordinate its interventions, the council-level strategies could be streamlined under the DfC, in effect becoming action plans that require less resource to develop. This reform could support councils in de-duplicating their efforts. It would also enable more joined-up working between local and regional government while increasing accountability.<sup>99</sup>

*"We don't have a Northern Ireland Executive strategy for older people... I think that if we had that strategy in place, that would be a step forward... Going forward if we were to have an overall strategy... and then individualised action plans for each [council] area... I think that probably would be better."* - age-friendly coordinator

*"What works here might not work in other areas... We can streamline resources... sharing templates... information, because that saves time creating forms. Action plans need to come from the needs of the age sector networks and our older people on the ground."* - age-friendly coordinator

### *Developing a strategy that supports the age sector*

Facilitating the growth of existing, local age sector organisations offers a cost-effective way to build the infrastructure required to meet the needs of older people in their specific localities. The case studies included at the end of this report demonstrate the significant impact and return on investment generated by mature age sector organisations.

There is an acute need to support the sector given the growing older population, the impact of COVID-19, and the uncertainty in the current funding landscape (challenges facing the sector are outlined in more detail later in this report).<sup>100</sup> Including a commitment to support age sector organisations as part of an updated Active Ageing Strategy could help increase the resilience of vital, but at-risk, voluntary and community services. In the absence of intervention, there is a risk that even the more mature age sector

<sup>98</sup> World Health Organization (2017) [Age-friendly environments in Europe: A handbook of domains for policy action](#).

<sup>99</sup> This alignment should not constitute a uniform approach to intervention across all council areas. It should instead identify areas of further collaboration and efficiency, capacity building, and ultimately impact within local contexts.

<sup>100</sup> Age NI (2023) [Briefing Paper for the APG on Ageing and Older People- Active Ageing Strategy](#).



organisations will have to reduce their offering or cease operating (see case study 4 as an example). Such a scenario would ultimately increase reliance on already pressured public services.

### *Developing the role of the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI)*

The Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland aims to implement the Age Friendly Communities' model.<sup>101</sup> With further development, the AFNNI could play a pivotal role in the delivery of a new Active Ageing Strategy.

*“The AFNNI is not a constituted body... We would like to try and move towards getting some sort of constituted status... [then] the work of the network could be shared a lot more... If we could get to the stage where you had staffing there and the ability to draw down funding, we could start looking at employment at the Northern Ireland level. [We could look at] housing, transport, and those issues that are probably better dealt with at a higher level, rather than individually by each of the eleven councils.” - age-friendly coordinator*

### *Strategic planning for an ageing population*

In June 2024, COPNI published a report outlining the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population.<sup>102</sup> In the study, COPNI highlights need in areas of strategic importance, and recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive include an Outcome in the Programme for Government that prioritises an ageing population. Despite COPNI's report, and campaigning from the wider age sector,<sup>103</sup> the final Programme for Government, published in February 2025, includes just two references to older people, and one to an ageing population.<sup>104</sup>

However, a motion recognising the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2025. The motion specifically called on “the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society”.<sup>105</sup> Clearly, any government action to develop such a cross-departmental strategy would overlap

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<sup>101</sup> Centre for Ageing Better (n.d.) [Four steps to becoming an Age-friendly Community](#).

<sup>102</sup> COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning. The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

<sup>103</sup> COPNI (2024) [The Commissioner for Older People and Age NI call for Northern Ireland's ageing population to be prioritised in Programme for Government](#).

<sup>104</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2025) [Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. Programme for Government 2024 – 2027](#).

<sup>105</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2025) [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).



with the Active Ageing Strategy. Therefore, clarity should be provided on how the Northern Ireland Executive will address this demand by the Assembly for a cross-departmental strategy, and what it will mean for the Active Ageing Strategy.

Ultimately, without commitments from government that are cross-departmental in nature, it is likely that intervention to support an ageing population will remain insufficient for the increasing level of need of our ageing population.

*“I think something that needs looked at is statutory involvement in the age sector, particularly the age-friendly work. We have a huge transport issue, but we can’t get anyone from transport [the Department for Infrastructure] to attend [our meetings]. We know we have an ageing population, but the Department for Communities hasn’t given us a new Active Ageing Strategy.” - age-friendly coordinator*

## Conclusion

This chapter has evidenced need for intervention by government across the WHO’s age-friendly domains, illustrating that current government intervention is not at an appropriate level to support older people. While it is positive that the Northern Ireland Assembly has recognised the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population<sup>106</sup>, government must now commit resources to preparing public services appropriately. As part of this commitment to strategic planning, the measures that already exist should be evaluated, what works should be built upon, and the challenges that exist should be addressed. COPNI proposes that the next steps should include:

**The Active Ageing Strategy stakeholder feedback from consultations, and previous evaluations, should be published:** The DfC has determined that the current Active Ageing framework is still appropriate. However, feedback received by COPNI regarding the strategy indicates considerable disappointment with the strategy in its current form. Therefore, it is important that collated feedback from the 2014 and 2016 consultations is published,<sup>107</sup> alongside any independent evaluations of the strategy.

**The role of the Active Ageing Strategy in supporting local strategic planning should be considered:** Each council currently has a separate age-friendly strategy.

<sup>106</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on ‘Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population’. The motion states ‘[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...’. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>107</sup> Department for Communities (n.d.) [Consultations](#).

While the Active Ageing Strategy incorporates aspects of age-friendly practice, its interventions are not thematically set out against the eight WHO age-friendly domains.<sup>108</sup> If the new Active Ageing Strategy opted to use these domains to structure its intervention, both local and Northern Ireland-wide action would be better aligned. This would be beneficial in two ways. First, it would support more joined-up and strategic working between local councils and government. Second, it would present an opportunity through which local strategy development and delivery could be streamlined, improving efficiency at the council level and freeing up resource.

**The role of the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland in supporting strategic planning should be considered:** The AFNNI has representatives from the DfC, PHA, COPNI, Age NI, local councils, and the wider age sector. This network can be supported to grow as a resource to contribute to the delivery of strategic intervention to support an ageing population, connecting Northern Ireland-level and local interventions.

**The importance of the age sector should be recognised and supported for its role in the delivery of age-friendly intervention:** The age sector has a significant role in delivering local intervention (see the next chapter and case studies). The role of these organisations should be recognised, as should the challenges they face (also outlined later in this report). The government should help address these challenges to increase the resilience of the sector. Identifying best practice and scaling up what works will contribute to a more responsive community-based approach to the needs of an ageing population. Scaling up age sector best practice can support older people in the immediate term, while longer-term transformation is planned.

**Clarity and next steps on strategic planning for an ageing population should be established:** In early 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly acknowledged the importance of strategic planning to support an ageing population.<sup>109</sup> The Northern Ireland Executive should clarify how it will respond to this demand by the Assembly for cross-departmental strategic planning. *What resources will be committed? What will be expected of individual departments? What will strategic planning mean for the Active Ageing Strategy? What role will key stakeholders like the AFNNI have in supporting, planning and delivering interventions?*

<sup>108</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

<sup>109</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

## IMPACT THROUGH LOCAL AGE FRIENDLY INTERVENTION

The previous chapter of this report establishes the need for greater support for older people in Northern Ireland. Practically, preparing for an ageing population will require a degree of long-term planning and transformation. That is why it is important to recognise the positive impact of existing intervention, which should be supported to become more resilient and scaled up immediately in a way that helps meet the needs of older people.

Identifying what types of interventions work and scaling best practice should be part of the government's next steps in its efforts to prepare for an ageing population. This chapter focusses on the age sector networks (ASNs), which are the age sector organisations that contribute to the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI). These organisations already deliver impactful intervention within the developing age-friendly infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The different ways ASNs support strategic planning for an ageing population are set out below, against themes of best practice identified by the WHO.<sup>110</sup> Case studies outlining the work and impact of four mature ASNs are also included at the end of this report.

It is important to note that while this chapter focusses on ASNs as examples of good practice already embedded in age-friendly infrastructure, the age sector is diverse. There are many organisations offering both broad and specialist services within the community not explicitly linked to age-friendly principles. COPNI is not advocating for engagement and support for ASNs in isolation. Rather, COPNI is highlighting the effectiveness of ASN activity in order to increase recognition of age sector efforts generally, and to encourage increased partnership working from government with all of the age sector.

### Partnerships, networking and stakeholders

WHO guidance highlights that identifying stakeholders that facilitate age-friendly practice is important.<sup>111</sup> Understanding the nature and strength of relationships in the existing ecosystem at the local, national and international levels is key, as is delivering services in accordance with the complexity of community need. ASNs align to this best practice in several ways.

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<sup>110</sup> World Health Organization (2023) [National programme for age-friendly cities and communities – A guide](#).

<sup>111</sup> World Health Organization (2023) [National programme for age-friendly cities and communities – A guide](#).

**ASNs connect older people to appropriate services in their community and raise awareness regarding what services are available for older people.**

*“We make onward referrals to home accident prevention, energy efficiency, the fire service... The amount of things people don’t know they’re entitled to.” – age sector network representative*

*“We never find ourselves in a position where we receive a referral and have nothing. There’s always some connection, and even if the first connection might not be right... by the third try you might get them [the older person] into a group.” – age sector network representative*

*“When you’re talking about isolated and vulnerable people who aren’t connecting, I suppose that’s when the likes of an age sector network, and the programmes they’re doing come into play, like the befriending service [to address unmet needs].” – age-friendly coordinator*

**ASNs facilitate greater levels of collaboration within the sector. This enhances the services offered to older people.**

*“All the other groups in the area are aware of the ASN... They ask us if there is any chance we could get a speaker, get somebody out to coach a physical activity class...[or] help with transport... We’re getting more referrals... because we’re networking and working with more groups.” – age sector network representative*

*“There are partnerships that we’ve built up over the years with different organisations, and the positive relationships that we’ve got within these groups [support our work].” – age sector network representative*

**ASNs encourage partnership working and reduce duplication of service provision in the sector. As such, ASNs play a vital role in an increasingly challenging and restricted funding environment.**

*“Because there’s less and less funding, we tend to match up groups, where there’s a cost... If the network wasn’t there, all these wee groups would be putting [grant applications] in for the same thing all the time... We can see which groups have got the money to do something, and they’re actually looking [for] a group to work with... So, we can [help] partner [groups up]. You’re not duplicating the whole way through the area, and they [age sector organisations] can tap into free stuff.” – age sector network representative*

**The work of the ASNs complements the work of the PHA age-friendly coordinators, connecting policy with delivery of services and the lived experience of older people.**

*“I think the age sector networks are a great asset to the council areas... They're your go to if you need to get stuff out into the community... They'll have access to groups that you might not be aware of.”* – age-friendly coordinator

*“The age-friendly coordinator is doing the falls events at the minute. In most things we take on the recruitment role. We make sure it's not a wasted event, making sure the right people are there and that the people that can, benefit; and that everybody can benefit from that.”* – age sector network representative

### Leadership and strategic thinking

Bringing together stakeholders to design services that have shared goals is part of collaborative and effective age-friendly delivery. With effective leadership and strategic thinking, existing structures and influential connections can deliver positive change. The government and other sectors are also more likely to engage with the age sector if there is clear strategic overlap between age-friendly practice and other priorities.

Age NI plays a significant role in supporting ASNs to coordinate their strategic engagement. Age NI and ASNs have a shared strategic framework<sup>112</sup> that includes a series of commitments and proposed actions to build a stronger and more connected age sector. **Through collaboration, the ASNs and their partners deliver coordinated messaging and act as an authoritative voice for the sector.**

*“When we say something as a network within Age NI, it's not one person or an individual opinion, it's across the province and it's with a stronger voice.”* – age sector network representative

ASNs are closely linked with strategic groups at the regional level. In this capacity, **ASNs articulate the voices of older people, ensuring that their representatives emphasise the issues that are most important to their age group.**

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<sup>112</sup> Age NI and Age Sector Networks (2023) A Shared Strategy Framework 2023 – 2026. Provided to COPNI by Age NI.

*“We hold question times where we bring councillors in, and older people can ask questions one to one. We have older people forums that we do every year.”* – age sector network representative

*“We’re not just [hosting] our own forum meetings and members... Organisations [reach out and engage with the ASN]. We sit on the All-Party Group on Preventing Loneliness... we go to Housing Executive events, and all the Age NI stuff.”* – age sector network representative

### **ASN collaboration also benefits delivery partners across the sector.**

*“When they [ASNs] go back to their forums [after speaking with me], they feed back that information so that it’s really a cascade... [ASNs] also come back to me with information... from all across the region, from the older people groups, and this all feeds into the All-Party Group.”* – age-friendly coordinator

### **Human, financial, institutional, and cultural resources**

Dedicated resource for age-friendly initiatives at the national level is critically important.<sup>113</sup> While ASNs have limited input into government budget setting in relation to older people and an ageing population, **many ASNs provide a function that helps to coordinate resources to enable the sector to deliver maximum impact to older people.**

*“The staff coordinate everything and do the partnership work. They look for the facilities that you can get free or very cheap and bring in all the volunteers... And it’s the partnership working... It’s knowing who is out there and what money is available to deliver stuff, [working with] the health trust, the council, and other community groups... [who] could just be looking a partner or people to do it with. That’s the value, being able to match people up with stuff that’s already out there, so that you’re not duplicating [activities]”* – age sector network representative

**ASNs help many smaller age sector organisations that lack the technical capacity to identify and apply for funding.**

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<sup>113</sup> COPNI's report on the Programme for Government outlines the challenges relating to an ageing population, and the consequences of not including specific commitments regarding older people in the Programme for Government. COPNI (2024) [At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

*“For a lot of the smaller seniors groups, the same person is the treasurer, among other roles. When a funder is asking for separate accounts and reports, it scares them off. A lot of them [older people’s groups] would only need £100 [for the activity]. We put in a bid in which we would act as an umbrella group. We would offer certain groups £1,000 each for the year and they would have to spend it under certain categories. They wouldn’t get cash, but we would do the reports and finance [for them] ... All they have is a budget... The groups were all into this. We thought it was a good idea.”* – age sector network representative

*“We get a budget, where we’re able to give them [older people’s groups] a few hundred pounds a year. It means a lot. Every new year cycle, in the first week, people come looking for that funding... Even just to get them on a bus to go somewhere... to pay their insurance or their running costs for a few months... [Or] I would help them do their funding applications.”* – age sector network representative

In terms of resources, the value of having staff in a paid capacity within ASNs was highlighted. Paid staff ensure that there is a dedicated resource to support smaller age sector organisations.

*“The common denominator in any groups that are thriving is that they have a paid worker... That support for community groups or a network is beneficial... to go out and help them find funding.”* – age-friendly co-ordinator

Notably, the number of volunteer hours that are provided through the different ASNs is also significant.

*“There’s one coordinator [for good morning services in two areas] and the rest of staff are volunteers. We added it up recently how many hours went in... It was about 8,000 [volunteer] hours in one year.”* – age sector network representative

*“All these community groups are vital for keeping their members active and socially engaged and trying to prevent them from becoming socially isolated or lonely.”* – age-friendly coordinator



## Capacity building

WHO guidance notes how staff and the broader community should be supported to develop relevant age-friendly knowledge, skills, capabilities and practice.<sup>114</sup> This can be facilitated through knowledge and best practice exchange within a local community setting, between sectors, and among peers.

**ASNs contribute to several strategic groups at the Northern Ireland level, sharing best practice and supporting strategic planning.** The value of Age NI as a mechanism for sharing best practice in ASNs is frequently highlighted by stakeholders.

*“I’m meeting with Age NI at the end of the month. I’m going to take advice and ask how best to go about it [establishing an ASN in my area].”*

- age-friendly coordinator

**ASNs work together and share the most effective approaches to income generation.**

*“We connected with the whole Age NI thing [Age NI’s coordination of the ASNs], and because we have the service level agreement in place, other groups are asking us ‘How does that work?... How did you do it and who did you bring onboard?’”* - age sector network representative

**ASNs integrate with the wider public sector to increase awareness of age-friendly intervention.**

*“We share our information with the Access and Information Centre... This is a trust initiative... It has all the information that older people need in one place [and] there’s a team of people [offering information] ... They [the trust] get calls from someone presenting loneliness or isolation, and can give us a call... We’ve 29 ways in which we’ve received referrals”* – age sector network representative

## Knowledge, research and innovation

WHO guidance highlights the importance of collecting, compiling and sharing appropriate knowledge relevant to age-friendly practice.<sup>115</sup> This should include meaningful co-

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<sup>114</sup> World Health Organization (2023) [National programme for age-friendly cities and communities – A guide.](#)

<sup>115</sup> World Health Organization (2023) [National programme for age-friendly cities and communities – A guide.](#)

research with older people, including those in marginalised groups, to generate knowledge.

While technical research is beyond the scope of ASN services, age-friendly coordinators highlight how **ASNs share practical insight from their direct engagement with older people living in different council areas with their partners.**

*“The age sector networks, they're the groups that are on the ground delivering the programmes and working face to face with the older population... They know where there are needs and where the gaps [to service provision are]. The age-friendly coordinators, we're more strategic.”*  
– age-friendly coordinator

*“We found out during COVID, when we were working on the food boxes, it was the people... that were really in need that weren't asking for the food boxes... Age sector organisations were aware and they were like, ‘you know, such and such, they need the food boxes’. So, it's good to have that kind of relationship with the network.”* – age-friendly coordinator

*“If we do get this established [a group of new ASNs], it's the shared knowledge, it's best practice [that comes from integration with a wider network]. Maybe, if a piece of funding comes in, maybe two organisations could come together and put in a joint application... That's what I'm hoping [and] that we're all singing off the same page.”* – age-friendly coordinator

### **ASNs are a key source of information for many older people.**

*“Older people know that if they need to know anything, they can call in. We would like to see ourselves as an umbrella organisation they can ring and ask for a number. They would say ‘Can you give me a number for the council?’... The phones never stop.”* – age sector network representative

*“We hold four large wellbeing events in the winter. We invite 600 older people, and we bring in all the organisations within the community that are helping and supporting older people.... They are given the opportunity to move around, and it gives them a chance to talk one to one, ask questions and to make self-referrals. They've always been a great success...and we have a waiting list for the next year... [and a range of]*

*guest speakers to help older people find out about the local community.”*

– age sector network representative

*“We can get people to go along [to events], whether that should be taking a group along, or promoting it through Facebook and at the forum meetings and out round the groups. The other side of it is that we can deliver for them, if it’s an actual activity or something like that, if there’s a presentation. Or they’ll partner up with us.”* – age sector network representative

### **ASNs are a primary source when identifying need in the local context.**

*“We’ve a focus on transport, health and poverty. So, the age sector networks take those areas to work on and meet outside of our meetings as well... [and] they’re doing this on a voluntary basis, they come to those meetings voluntarily... [They] make sure that all those people’s views are represented and feed into certain things that we’re talking about.”* – age-friendly coordinator

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

The WHO highlights the importance of a plan to generate, analyse and use relevant, accurate, timely, affordable information from various sources for monitoring progress and impact in priority areas both regionally and at the local level.<sup>116</sup> There are several critical factors for monitoring and evaluation that should be assessed at the national level (organisation, responsibilities, capabilities, incentives and demand for such a system). A minimum set of data on inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts is encouraged to support comparisons, standardised monitoring and review, and scaling up of interventions; as is a harmonised method for collection, collation, analysis and reporting of disaggregated data. Data should be analysed regularly and made publicly available. Collection and publication of relevant age-friendly data in Northern Ireland is discussed further in the next chapter of this report, “Identifying challenges facing the age sector”.

In terms of the information that is collected by ASNs, progress is currently tracked via a standardised “score card” mechanism, which is managed by Age NI.<sup>117</sup> As per funding

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<sup>116</sup> World Health Organization (2023) [National programme for age-friendly cities and communities – A guide](#).

<sup>117</sup> Information on standardised evaluation of age sector networks provided by Age NI.

arrangements, several ASNs also produce end of programme reports. Several examples of metrics collected by ASNs are included in the case studies at the end of this report.

## IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES FACING THE AGE SECTOR

While the previous chapter outlines the many ways in which ASNs contribute to age-friendly delivery, the challenges facing the age sector must be recognised. This chapter outlines the barriers to age-friendly delivery in Northern Ireland. Challenges were identified in consultation with ASNs and age-friendly coordinators.

### A lack of coordinated intervention to address an ageing population

While the issue of demographic ageing is recognised, the reality of current budgets and planning in government shows a lack of commitment to the issues most important to older people.<sup>118</sup>

*“There’s emphasis being put on an ageing population, but all the cuts and underfunding are directly affecting older people.”* – age-friendly coordinator

*“Isolation and loneliness are huge and becoming even more of an issue... [Services are] getting lost because they don’t have the funding.”* – age-friendly coordinator

A reduction in resources has meant government-produced age-friendly statistical information packages are no longer available.<sup>119</sup> This has a bearing on how aware the government is of older people’s issues, the ability of stakeholders to demonstrate need for interventions, and the ability to demonstrate the impact of interventions.

*“Each council used to have an age profile from NISRA... They no longer do that... We’ve lost this baseline of information that we could bring to council.”* – age-friendly coordinator

<sup>118</sup> COPNI (2024) [Response to Consultation on Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’](#).

<sup>119</sup> The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has ceased producing an “age-friendly” profile for each council. This profile included a summary of statistics relevant to older people.

## Inconsistent funding options

Reduced funding has significant bearing on the wider age sector. Information provided to COPNI by Age NI suggests<sup>120</sup> that the majority of ASNs have a medium to high risk of closure due to limited and increasingly competitive funding options.

*“A couple of years ago, in the one year, we were on our last week three times... [Then on] our last day in work we got a phone call from the council. They were going to work with us to see what they could do. That was when we established our service level agreement.”* – age sector network representative

*“Looking past our funded period, we’re asking are we going to have to opt out of supporting some services? And are they [older people groups] going to dwindle into nothing because they don’t have project managers like me to do their funding applications.”* – age sector network representative

*“There’s a lot of smaller community voluntary organisations and they don’t have the resources or revenue to keep it going... It’s a big issue out there.”* – age-friendly coordinator

## Short-term funding timelines

ASNs highlight the many positive relationships that they have developed over time with different organisations that fund their core services. Access to public and voluntary and community funding has been integral to sustaining many of the ASNs. The nature of some funding however introduces operational challenges that are common across most age sector organisations. For example, challenging funding environments can often mean organisations have had to alter service provision to fit the remit of available funding.

*“You have to reinvent yourself for new money. It doesn’t matter if the programme is a great success... [Reinvention] costs money and time”* – age sector network representative

*“What we’re doing is working and this is what the older people need... Big funders like to see new projects which is fair, but then you’re starting from the very bottom. New projects don’t have the relationships and the*

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<sup>120</sup> Age NI (2022) Age Sector Engagement Funding Table. Provided to COPNI by Age NI.

*knowledge... [You're] having to start up all over again."* – age sector network representative

Uncertainty around funding also negatively impacts staffing and institutional knowledge.

*"In the first six months of a new project, anybody coming in new to the team is just finding their feet... then in the last six months they're thinking 'I need to be looking for a new job'... That hampers sustainability... The cost of recruiting, and the time recruiting... You have to start again. So, there's a whole sustainability issue."* – age sector network representative

*"In terms of funding... To get up and going [setting up and running a new project], a year isn't a very long period of time."* – age-friendly coordinator

### Provision of services beyond organisation scope

Representatives from ASNs, and age-friendly coordinators, note how age sector organisations offer regular feedback to local and regional representative groups. This engagement often goes unfunded and can detract from the capacity of age sector organisations to provide the services for which they are funded. Despite this engagement being important to the development of the age sector, balancing service provision with facilitating sector development can be challenging.

*"The age sector network reps aren't as consistent at attending [AFNNI meetings], but it's no fault of their own. If they do attend, it's over and above their own funding, which doesn't have the AFNNI as part of their targets. They might not even have the funding for travel or meetings,"* – age sector network representative

### A competitive funding landscape

Several ASN representatives highlighted the increasingly competitive funding landscape for age sector organisations. As such, voluntary and community organisations of different sizes often seek funding from the same source.

*"We're now going for the same pots of money that all these big organisations are pitching for... Everything's being squeezed... There are*



*things bigger organisations are going for that they would never have gone for.” – age sector network representative*

One ASN notes how their current funder is considering tendering their services competitively, as opposed to renewing the existing service level agreement. Tendered services can introduce similar challenges.

*“If our contract goes out to tender, we’ll be up against some big organisations that we know and don’t know, and they may [have a dedicated team who] know how to write a tender, and we don’t know.... What would happen to the relationships that we have developed over many years?” – age sector network representative*

While there is value in the tendering process, it can also introduce barriers to voluntary and community sector applicants, which should be considered in future planning.<sup>121</sup>

### Resource intensive application processes

Many of the organisations supported by the ASNs are led by older people. As such, older people are able to develop the services that aim to meet their own needs. As many of the older people contributing to the age sector offer their time on a voluntary basis, there may be a reluctance to take on further responsibilities that come with formally constituting their group.

*“A lot of these people want to make a difference in their community, but a lot of them are volunteers and they don’t want, as they get older, to be [leading a group that is] constituted. They don’t want to take responsibility for accounts. The whole Charity Commission and regulation side of it then makes it complicated for these groups” – age-friendly coordinator*

Stakeholders further highlight how, for smaller age sector organisations, current funding applications can be time intensive and require technical insight into the application process that some organisations don’t have.

*“For £400 [of funding] it can be a 12-page application... the paperwork that’s involved for such small amounts [can be too much].” – age-friendly coordinator*

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<sup>121</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2022) [The role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) organisations in public procurement](#).

As highlighted in this report, some of the ASNs address these challenges by partnering with smaller older people's groups to, for example, link them with other groups with available resource. ASNs also support these groups by applying for funding on their behalf. Scaling up this function across the age sector could therefore remove some of the pressures faced by smaller groups supporting older people.

## Conclusion

The age sector plays an essential role in ensuring older people are supported, connected, and empowered within their communities. Their work often bridges gaps left by statutory services. Age sector organisations provide not only vital social support, they also amplify the voices of older people in policy and planning processes.

Without strategic planning, and meaningful government partnership, the ability of these organisations to deliver on their potential is severely undermined. Short-term funding cycles, complex application processes, and a competitive funding environment place pressure on the sector. These challenges threaten the sustainability of services at a time when Northern Ireland is going through significant demographic change.

To realise the full potential of age-friendly delivery, government must work in close collaboration with the age sector, recognising its expertise, valuing its contributions, and investing in long-term, coordinated interventions. The age sector must not be a peripheral actor but should, in fact, be a core partner in delivering outcomes for an ageing population. Strengthening this partnership is essential if Northern Ireland is to respond effectively and fairly to the challenges and opportunities of demographic change. Commitment by government is required urgently, as there are already mature age sector organisations operating with untenable funding options (see case study 4), likely to impact future delivery.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report sets out the need for a more strategic, coordinated, and adequately resourced response to Northern Ireland's ageing population. While it is positive that the Northern Ireland Assembly has acknowledged the need for strategic planning in this area<sup>122</sup>, meaningful transformation will take time and must be supported by sustained commitment across departments. The current budgetary context in Northern Ireland presents real challenges, but there are clear opportunities to strengthen policy and service delivery by building on existing infrastructure and expertise.

Northern Ireland has the foundations in place for a more age-friendly society. The Department for Communities' Active Ageing Strategy, age-friendly strategies in all 11 council areas, and the work the AFNNI as a collective, and as individual stakeholders, demonstrate that a system of age-friendly support already exists. A review of this infrastructure shows its enormous value. Yet, this report also establishes a clear societal need for such support to be developed further.

As such, COPNI provides a series of recommendations, outlining how existing infrastructure can be developed. This includes development of Northern Ireland's policy response to an ageing population, and recognition of, and increased engagement with the age sector.

Age sector organisations must be recognised as key strategic partners in the design and delivery of public services for older people. By engaging more effectively with these organisations and the AFNNI, government can co-design interventions that are both responsive to local needs and aligned with international best practice, such as the WHO's age-friendly framework.<sup>123</sup>

The recommendations in this report offer practical steps for building a strategic response that makes best use of what is already working. If implemented, these proposals could help ensure that Northern Ireland is prepared, not only for the future needs of an ageing population, but also for the immediate delivery of more inclusive, age-friendly public services.

<sup>122</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>123</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

**Recommendation 1: The Executive Office should clarify how it aims to progress the motion passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly acknowledging the importance of strategic planning to prepare for an ageing population.**

A motion recognising the importance of strategic planning for an ageing population was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2025.<sup>124</sup> It is likely that any government action in this area will overlap with existing efforts to support older people. Clarity should therefore be provided on what the Executive Office intends to do in the current government mandate, and what it will mean for the age-friendly infrastructure that already exists.

**Recommendation 2: The Executive Office should engage with the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI), to develop its approach to strategic planning.**

The AFNNI was launched in 2019 and has a membership of age-friendly coordinators from all eleven council areas, alongside representatives from the ASNs, Department for Communities, Public Health Agency (PHA), Age NI, and COPNI. The mission of the network is to enhance age-friendly connections across Northern Ireland by advocating for inclusive policies, promoting awareness, ensuring equal access to services, and empowering communities through engagement and support.<sup>125</sup> The AFNNI has working groups for strategic areas, such as housing, transport, and resourcing the age sector. By engaging with this network, the Executive Office can develop a strategic approach to an ageing population that draws on the extensive expertise of the sector.

Importantly, the Executive Office should collaborate with the AFNNI to produce a long-term plan to develop age sector organisations and address the challenges they face. Informed by the expertise of several age sector groups, the AFNNI can help determine how to scale up proven interventions to achieve cost-effective and immediate impact.

**Recommendation 3: The Department for Communities should deliver a fully resourced, cross-departmental update to the Active Ageing Strategy, grounded in evaluation.**

The sole government strategy in place to address older people's needs holistically is the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022. Despite inadequacies in the current Active

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<sup>124</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

<sup>125</sup> Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (n.d.) [Age Friendly Network NI](#).

Ageing Strategy, it was announced in 2025 that its existing framework will not change, and that the strategy will be renewed as an action plan at a future date. COPNI has received no assurances that pre-existing issues identified in consultation processes, or previous evaluations, will be addressed in the action plan update.<sup>126 127 128 129</sup>

COPNI maintains that it is inappropriate to renew the strategy in its current form. In its 2021 consultation response, COPNI noted that “the Strategy is more a reporting of positive initiatives impacting older people since 2016, [rather] than what it should be: a rigorous framework”. To be effective, the Active Ageing Strategy must include:

- Appropriate resource and funding allocation tethered to the strategy’s proposed outcomes;
- The allocation of responsibilities within the strategy to government departments;
- A strong relationship between strategic outcomes and departmental actions; and
- Quantifiable and timebound objectives.<sup>130</sup>

The current report highlights the pressing need to support the age sector in Northern Ireland. The renewed Active Ageing Strategy should be remodelled to meet the level of need described. Appropriate resource allocation and cross-departmental responsibilities should be a key part of a remodelled Active Ageing Strategy.

**Recommendation 4: The Active Ageing Strategy should adopt the World Health Organization’s age-friendly framework to facilitate a more coordinated approach to population ageing.**

The WHO age-friendly framework sets out the needs of an ageing population against eight “domains” of age-friendly practice.<sup>131</sup> While the WHO age-friendly framework informs the Active Ageing Strategy, the age-friendly domains are not used to structure the

<sup>126</sup> There have been two formal consultations on the development of the Active Ageing Strategy. The first consultation in 2014 addressed the development of the original strategy. The second consultation in 2016 offered an opportunity to provide feedback on the strategy’s annual indicators. See Department for Communities, [Consultations](#).

<sup>127</sup> The DfC provided an update in 2020 that outlined progress against its already established indicators, Department for Communities (2020) [Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2022](#).

<sup>128</sup> Co-design for the strategy’s update commenced in 2021. In July 2022, the Department stated that ‘An evaluation of the Strategy has commenced and a report will be published once the Strategy has concluded’, Department for Communities (2022) [Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2022](#).

<sup>129</sup> In January 2023, the DfC provided COPNI with an update on how the strategy review was progressing, noting that “COPNI’s response, responses from other stakeholders, the results of a public survey on Citizen Space, and updates on Strategy actions are being used to evaluate the outgoing Strategy”.

<sup>130</sup> COPNI (2021) [Consultation on the Active Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2022](#).

<sup>131</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

Active Ageing Strategy's interventions. In contrast, each of Northern Ireland's councils use the WHO domains in their age-friendly strategies.

By aligning the activities of the future Active Ageing Strategy to the WHO age-friendly framework, there are potential benefits:

- i) It would mean that the Public Health Agency, local councils, and DfC would be using consistent terminology and delivering intervention under the same framework.
- ii) There would be an opportunity to phase out council-level age-friendly strategies, to be replaced by shorter, needs-based action plans that sit under the DfC strategy. Shorter action plans that incorporate some replicable processes in their design would make local planning more efficient. Doing this would also help join-up the work completed in different localities, creating opportunities to increase collaboration, to reduce the duplication of service, and to increase accountability.
- iii) Departments would also be more likely to engage with local age-friendly coordinators if they knew their work was attached to a departmental strategy.

**Recommendation 5: The Public Health Agency should use its upcoming review of age-friendly practice as an opportunity to strengthen the community response to an ageing population.**

Age-friendly coordinators are funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA). The Age-friendly coordinators play a valuable role in coordinating council engagement with older people and in terms of planning within the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (AFNNI).

An evaluation of age-friendly practice in Northern Ireland is timely given the legislature's acknowledgement that there is a need to prepare strategically for an ageing population.<sup>132</sup> In its review, the PHA should recognise that each council area has unique needs, and also that the responsibilities of each age-friendly coordinator will vary, depending on where the role sits within their respective council's departments, and the wider ecosystem of organisations supporting older people.

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<sup>132</sup> On 25 February 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion tabled by Claire Sugden MLA on 'Strategic Planning for an Ageing Population'. The motion states '[The] Assembly recognises our ageing population and the challenges and opportunities this presents for public services... [and] calls on the Executive to develop a cross-departmental strategy to ensure services are adapted and resourced to meet the needs of an ageing society...'. See Northern Ireland Assembly, [Official Report: Tuesday 25 February 2025](#).

The PHA should identify what factors facilitate effective engagement with local government officials and the age sector, and identify where barriers exist. Age-friendly coordinators should be supported to increase their influence and to facilitate their delivery of localised support for older people.

**Recommendation 6: The Department of Health should recognise the value of age sector organisations in supporting community-based models that reduce pressure on the health service.**

The Minister for Health has already acknowledged the success of initiatives like the Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership as best practice (see case study 3) and has called for similar services across Northern Ireland.<sup>133</sup> ASNs such as the Southern Age Well Network also demonstrate significant reach and value for money (see case study 2) while working in partnership with the health service. As part of healthcare transformation, and preparation for an ageing population, the Department of Health should explore how age sector organisations can help improve health outcomes for older people and reduce demand on statutory services. Interventions that are cost-effective and impactful should be scaled up across trusts.

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<sup>133</sup> Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (n.d) [Minister for Health calls for community model of best practice for ageing to be rolled out across Northern Ireland](#).



## APPENDIX 1. CASE STUDIES

### Case study 1: Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum

In this case study, the valuable role of Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum is demonstrated. The case study shows the positive impact of past initiatives. It also reveals how partnership working between local government and age sector organisations can lead to a more sustainable intervention that supports older people where they live.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum was established in 1993. It aims to relieve poverty, advance education, and promote the preservation and protection of health for people aged fifty and over in Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough and its environs. The Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum is embedded in its community and hosts a range of activities. It also supports smaller older people's representative groups to deliver their core services. Over the years the forum has delivered several funded schemes. The impact of the most recent scheme is outlined below. The steps taken by the forum to increase its resilience and sustainability are also outlined.

#### *50+ and on the go*

This was a project for citizens over the age of 50 residing in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough that ran June 2017 – March 2021. The *50+ and on the go* project focused on:

- **Volunteering and Capacity Building:** training and upskilling group leaders and volunteers to provide a quality service and assist financial sustainability.
- **Social Isolation:** breaking down barriers and creating pathways for those experiencing social isolation to become more involved in community activities.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** providing opportunities for participation in a variety of activities and events that promote positive health and wellbeing suited to all abilities.

Through this project the forum:

- Offered 900+ hours of activities to 470 participants.
- Delivered 21 training or upskilling courses, completed by 202 participants.
- Involved 24 groups across the borough and 31 stakeholders or partners.

- Sent out 1,065 packs to support service users during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*“The 50+ and on the go project has provided inhouse activities and joined-up programmes.... Without support from the project, it would be too expensive for us [a sheltered accommodation facility] to provide these activities, and so it has enabled us to offer a wider and more interesting timetable of activities for residents.” – sheltered accommodation worker*

Of the people aged fifty and over that received support as part of the scheme:

- 94% felt their relationships / friendships with others had improved a little or a lot.
- 100% reported the extent to which they felt included in the community improved a little or a lot.
- 97% reported the extent to which they felt valued in the community improved a little or a lot.

*“It has given me new friends and interests. I find out things I wouldn’t know. I have joined other clubs and have been encouraged to try new things.”*

*“I brought a man up who had Parkinson’s just to be able to bring him here and pick him up and take him home; and I ended up staying. They were so good, the craic was great, and he said, ‘Why do you go away? Just stay,’ so I ended up staying and I’ve been here ever since.”*

- 86% of respondents felt their confidence had improved a little or a lot.
- 85% of respondents felt their self-esteem had improved a little or a lot.
- 88% of respondents felt their physical health had improved a little or a lot.
- 75% of respondents felt their mental health had improved a little or a lot.

*“People say, oh it’s a wee group meeting and a cup of tea. But what they don’t realise is before and during the cup of tea, what’s happened is some of these [older people] may have befriended somebody in that group and brought them along, so there’s a loneliness and a transport issue that’s been dealt with. They’re also at the group and talking to each other at a peer level... [For example, if an older person has a problem] someone else could have had something similar and say, ‘Go get it seen to, I had the same’. So, they’re sharing information on their health and wellbeing as well. All of it over a cup of tea... but the [less tangible]*

*benefits of it aren't seen and are not recorded"* – age sector network representative

### *Sustainability and future development*

The *50+ and on the go* project ended during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was at this time that the forum received emergency gap funding from Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council to operate in the short-term. Based on the success of the *50+ and on the go* project, and on recommendations made during its evaluation, it was suggested that the forum identify available longer-term funding options to increase overall resilience and sustainability. The forum has since established a service level agreement with the council and wider partners that allows it to offer continued services and to plan for longer-term delivery.

Impact under this new agreement is reported bi-annually and has proven successful. From October 2022 to September 2023 over 3,000 people attended events hosted by the forum, amassing over 910 hours of social activities for people aged 50+ living in the region. The leadership team at Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum in the same period attended 8 meetings at the council and Northern Ireland-level, 11 committee meetings or panels, and facilitated over 72 opportunities related to promotions, opportunities, or training for people aged fifty and over in the Antrim and Newtownabbey Council area.

The Antrim and Newtownabbey Seniors' Forum has been operating for just over thirty years, and its core staff and volunteer team have extensive knowledge with regards to what resource is needed to support older people at a local level. The most recent service level agreement is the next step to ensuring the forum runs longer-term. There is an opportunity for other regions to learn from the forum's current arrangement to strengthen age sector sustainability in their area.

## Case study 2: Southern Age Well Network

In this case study, the valuable role of the Southern Age Well Network is demonstrated. As a result of the work of the Southern Age Well Network, older people's groups in Newry, Mourne and Down are better connected to each other, and the overall infrastructure has been made more resilient. The case study is a good example of how an age sector organisation can contribute to an integrated response to the provision of healthcare.

The Southern Age Well Network was founded in 1996 and currently supports 78 older people's groups, with approximately 2,700 members.

*"If we engage two and a half thousand older people in the Newry area, that's 10% of the older population... and if those people aren't accessing their doctors and are receiving support from the community and voluntary sector... the benefits are immeasurable."*

The network offers guidance to groups in the Newry, Mourne and Down area. It ensures older people's organisations are connected to services, maintain good governance, have capacity to manage volunteers, and can access funding to deliver a range of services for older people.

*"We support groups directly... Whenever it first started it was primarily luncheon clubs... Now there's such a diverse range of groups... There are social groups, activity groups, church groups, men's sheds, choirs... In the case of [setting up] all these groups, there was a natural need for some sort of service."*

Overall, in 2022/23, 56 fundraising applications were submitted by 34 groups with the support of the Southern Age Well Network. This secured £235,956 worth of small grant money for older people's groups working in the Newry, Mourne and Down area. For every £1 that the Southern Age Well Network received from the trust, there was more than double that in funding accessed by groups in the local community.<sup>134</sup>

Through the work of the Southern Age Well Network there were:

- 30 groups supported in completing their annual governance checklist
- 63 fundraising strategies developed with member groups
- 32 returns to funders
- 3 constitution reviews

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<sup>134</sup> Southern Age Well Network (2024) Internal documentation provided to COPNI.

- 15 financial reports
- 13 needs assessments
- 10 AGMs
- 4 insurance policies secured
- 3 charity return statements
- 2 independent examiner reports
- 1 constitution developed
- 1 charity registered

The value of this support is reflected in comments by the Southern Age Well Network team:

- **Building relationships with the age sector:** *“We have such good relationships... Everything we do is about relationships... You can’t go in and start rooting through [age sector organisations’] bank statements, or the policies, or their procedures of governance [without good relations]... We’re on their side... They come to us.”*
- **Cost efficiency for public sector and application support for charity and community sector:** *“We spend our time looking for funding for other groups... For every pound the [Southern Health and Social Care] Trust gave us, we made it back over two pounds. This is not considering social value or cost reduction due to reduced [public] service use. We made sure everybody got the grants that they needed... If you look at the small investment... the return is significant.”*
- **Building a sustainable age sector:** *“When you look at our membership, we’re not facing any kind of crisis [in access to funding for older people’s representative groups]. We support with all the funding, so there’s money being generated all the time.”*
- **Practical support for the age sector:** *“It’s actual tangible things [we’re helping with] like small capital grants... so the men’s shed can keep up their work, or a women’s group can buy a sewing machine... These are the kinds of things that hit the nail on the head, that help these groups out.”*

### Health service integration

The Southern Age Well Network connects with statutory organisations such as the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and Newry Mourne and Down District Council. With the Systems not Structures report<sup>135</sup> including a recommendation to move towards more integrated health services in Northern Ireland, social infrastructure such as the Southern Age Well Network can facilitate older people to receive the support they need in their local communities.

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<sup>135</sup> Department of Health (2016) [Systems, Not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care](#).

*“The other big side is referral... We have the multidisciplinary teams in the [Southern Health and Social Care] Trust. Each GP practice has a mental health worker, physio, social workers... If someone presents with a medical issue, but there’s also something else going on, they’ll know straight away where to refer... If there’s a person in need... [For example] a frequent... [visitor to GPs] ... They [healthcare professionals] will know there’s a social pathway from there... We go meet them and make the connections. That’s one of our roles. The other is to make sure our workers and our volunteer teams are strong and well equipped [through appropriate training and skills development], so that they can take on those referrals, which can be diverse and demanding.”*

### *Sustainability and future development*

The Southern Age Well Network is currently funded by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The service has been operating for almost thirty years and offers good value for money. The network supports voluntary and community organisations to strengthen their offering and to increase their resilience. It also ensures there is a broad range of services available to older people in the Newry, Mourne and Down area. Overall, because of the services facilitated by the Southern Age Well Network, there are more options of support available to older people in their own community beyond the traditional healthcare pathways. The trust sees the value in the current partnership, which is formalised via a service level agreement. Other trusts, and indeed the Department of Health, in Northern Ireland can therefore learn from this partnership. Capacity to establish similar approaches in other trust areas should be explored.

### Case study 3: Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership

This case study demonstrates how age sector services can be incorporated as part of the provision of integrated healthcare. It also demonstrates how an age sector organisation can progress longer-term to develop its own income under a social enterprise business model.

Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP, or Agewell) aims to create a place where everyone can actively age well together, be involved, heard, and valued. MEAAP seeks to make the lives of older people better physically, better emotionally, and to ensure older people are better connected.

#### Service delivery 2022/23

The services provided by MEAAP seek to support future growth and strategic development in two priority areas, community and health. With thirteen employees, the organisation runs a variety of projects. In 2022/23, MEAAP:

- Provided 4,056 older people with one-to-one support
- Organised 15 events with 877 attendees
- Sent out 4,375 ezines and 3,789 magazines
- Relaunched 6 lunch clubs
- Participated in 11 local and regional networks
- Provided handyperson services to over 500 older people
- Provided good morning services to over 500 people

*“My health had deteriorated, and I was no longer able to get outside to enjoy my garden, as the step to the back door was a struggle for me. The handyperson came out and fitted a grab rail. He was very efficient and friendly and even completed a safety check of my home while he was there. I have been sitting out every day since and feel my overall health has improved.”*

#### IMPACTAgewell

IMPACTAgewell is one of the core services provided by MEAAP. It has been operating since 2017. It is open to individuals aged 60 and over who are registered in participating GP practices in the Ballymena, Carrickfergus, and Larne areas, with diabetes, heart



failure, stroke, Parkinson's, coronary heart disease, COPD, frailty, hypertension, or osteoporosis.

The overall vision of IMPACTAgewell is to improve the quality of life for older people by providing them with person-centred services that put their wellbeing and social needs on a par with their medical needs. IMPACTAgewell officers do this by connecting with GPs, Health and Social Care Trust staff and community pharmacists. Examples of support offered through IMPACTAgewell include befriending, home security checks, handy-person services, energy efficiency checks, benefits advice, transport, health support groups and various local clubs. If eligible, an older person will receive support from an IMPACTAgewell officer for up to six months. They will be supported to identify and address areas that can significantly improve their quality of life.

### *Sustainability and future development*

IMPACTAgewell was designed and delivered by MEAAP. An evaluation of its service provision has revealed that for every £1 invested in the model of care, £2.38 is saved by the health service through, for example, a reduction in GP appointments, less admissions to emergency departments, or less days spent in hospital. In light of such success, IMPACTAgewell has received a further two years of funding from the Department of Health's Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG).

Testimony from the Health Minister reflects the value of IMPACTAgewell, and further emphasises the potential of age sector organisations in the context of local preventative care:

*"The funding extension that my department has secured will mean this impressive service, IMPACTAgewell, can continue to support older people to improve their health and wellbeing outcomes. The community approach to delivering health and social care to our older people is an excellent example of what can be achieved when local services come together... I see this as an example of best practice, which I would like to see rolled out across Northern Ireland, to become common practice in how we deliver healthcare and support to an ageing population."* – Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt<sup>136</sup>

While this positive news reflects the contribution that the age sector network makes to the Mid and East Antrim area, ASN representatives recognise imminent resource pressures. As such, MEAAP has taken several steps to ensure that it can continue to provide

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<sup>136</sup> Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (2024) [Minister for Health calls for community model of best practice for Ageing to be rolled out across Northern Ireland](#).

services into the future, by looking beyond public and charity funding. This includes establishing a social enterprise known as DOTTS:

*“Not having multi-year budgets is the problem... [and] the current landscape is not sustainable... Charity and public funding is just smaller, so we asked how do we supplement our income in a more sustainable manner? We’ve worked for a number of years on [planning the social enterprise] DOTTS, which is Developing Options Through Tailored Solutions. It’s essentially a personal assistance service for older people... It comes before domiciliary care and is more preventative... It’s someone to come in for a couple of hours a week to change the beds, to clean the windows, to take you down to Tesco, to do your shopping... We know there’s people out there willing to pay for that because our family circles are getting smaller and more dispersed... So, we know there’s a massive need for that.”*

In addition to supporting older people, DOTTS also aims to address some of the challenges raised by an ageing workforce:

*“We’re looking at specific recruitment packages for over-50s... to see how we can utilise the assets in our community that are older people. How do we get people either back into the workforce or provide someone an opportunity to stay working for longer, but maybe in a job that’s more fulfilling, maybe it’s not as pressured.”*

MEAAP is another example of an ASN integrating with local public services. It illustrates how ASNs can develop to become more self-sufficient, offering a mix of free and paid services within their existing remit.

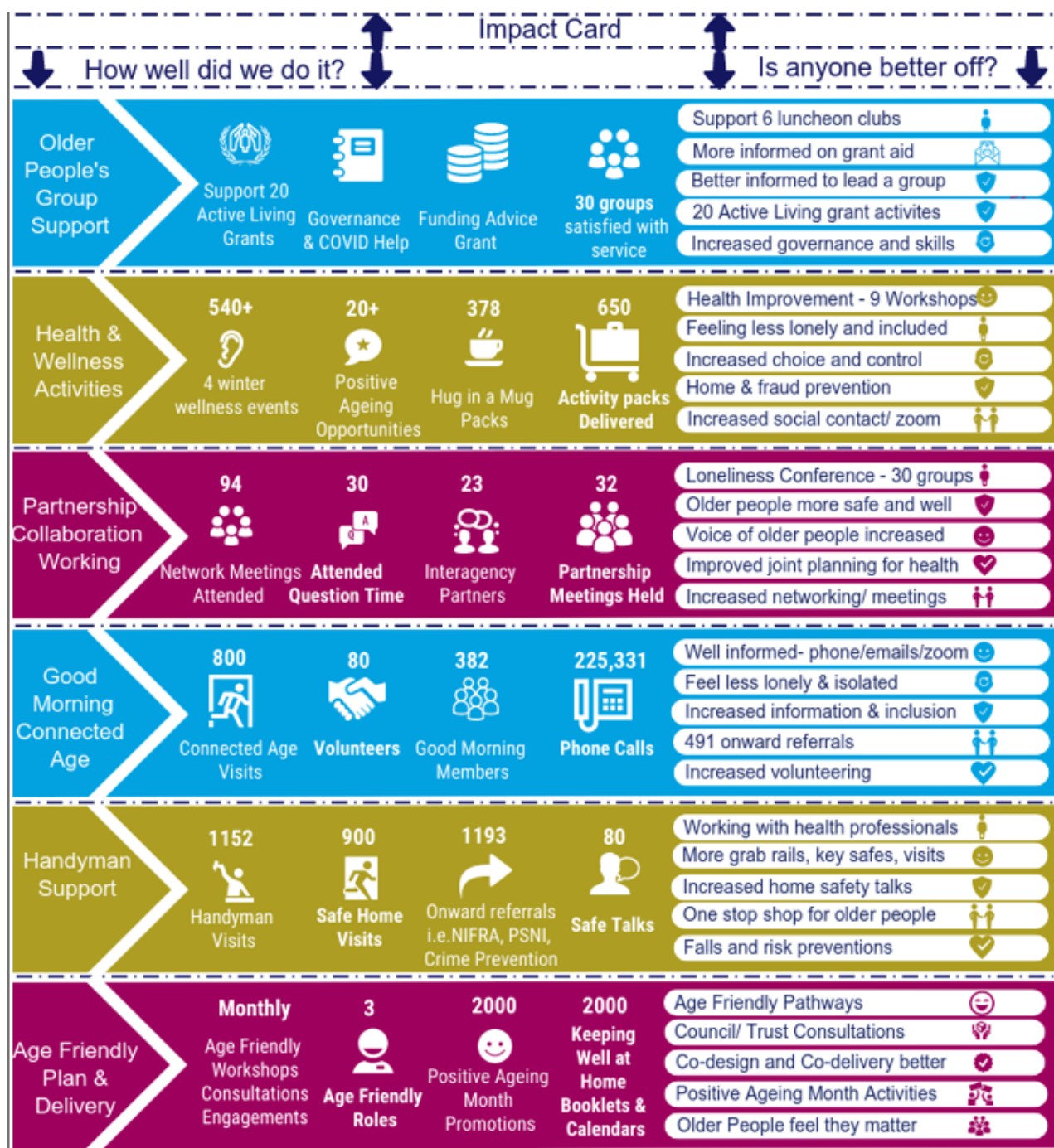
#### **Case study 4: Causeway Older Active Strategic Team**

This case study demonstrates the wraparound services that age sector organisations can provide locally. Importantly, it also outlines that despite providing extensive services to support older people, most age sector organisations are still reliant on shorter-term public or third sector funding, which creates significant risk for the provision of services longer-term.

The Causeway Older Active Strategic Team (COAST) is an ASN based in the Causeway Coast and Glens council area that has supported older people and older people's organisations for over twelve years. COAST's contribution to age-friendly infrastructure development and intervention in the Causeway Coast and Glens council area has been significant.

Whereas some ASNs (such as the Southern Age Well Network included in case study 2) focus on supporting older people's organisations, COAST is more diverse in its offering. It provides a "one stop shop" for age sector support in the Causeway Coast and Glens area. Support offered includes administrative assistance to older people's groups, interagency collaboration, a variety of positive ageing activities and events, and several services to support older people. Services include a handyperson scheme, good morning scheme, befriending scheme, and a social prescriber scheme. An overview of impacts generated by the ASN between 2018 and 2021 is set out overleaf.

FIGURE 1. COAST Impact Card 2018 - 2021



### Sustainability and future development

Since 2012, COAST has received an investment of £1.5 million from the National Lottery Community Fund. The National Lottery Community Fund has been the primary income source for COAST since 2012 but repeat funding of a similar volume will not be available longer-term. While COAST is well embedded in the local community and has a dedicated team of core staff and volunteers that support older people, without a change to

current funding arrangements, COAST will be unable to sustain existing services beyond June 2026.

Cessation of funding will detrimentally impact the approximate 80 groups supported by COAST, and the countless lives of older people that would otherwise receive direct or indirect support from the age sector network. The reduction of services, or the closure of COAST would be detrimental to the efforts of regional age-friendly planning and intervention. This is all in the context of a regional older people's population expected to grow from 33,015 to 51,078 between 2024 and 2039 (a 55% increase).

COAST has already engaged with local partners and funders, but commitment of funding to the level required is still in question. The organisation reflects that:

*“COAST should be an essential part of the future planning for addressing the challenges of an ageing population. A solid and robust community and voluntary infrastructure needs to be recognised as essential to support council departments to co-deliver on their strategies – engage with older people and help Government departments to meet their social, health, economic, and environmental objectives.”*

With consideration of COAST's extended scope (beyond supporting older people's groups only), costing has been developed to outline required funding for the service, at three levels:

- **An essential funding level to secure COAST:** £100,000 per year
- **A basic funding level to secure COAST with no change to current services:** £200,000 per year
- **A desirable funding level to secure services for Causeway Coast & Glens:** £300,000 per year

The £300,000 per year option would fund seven members of staff and cover rent, phone, insurance, accounts, engagement at partnership and AFNNI meetings and project costs for key services and wellness activities. COAST is a key example of a robust ASN at risk of closure due to shrinking funding options.

## APPENDIX 2. CAVEATS AND CLARIFICATIONS

### Use of the term “older people”

There is great diversity within older age groups. While some older people require additional support, it is important to recognise that many older people live independent lives and feel that their needs are met in the place in which they live. Throughout this report, when “older people” are referred to generally, this is not to generalise the experience of all older people. Rather, reference to “older people” is in relation to demographic trends and issues in the context of the ageing population policy area.

Significantly, in the next two decades, the proportion of Northern Ireland’s population that is older will increase at a rate not previously experienced. Demographic ageing at this pace will fundamentally change how our society is structured and how our services are funded. While ageist narratives are common in relation to public service provision for older people, when COPNI refers to the implications of an ageing population, it is not to position older people as a policy problem to be solved. Instead, COPNI is highlighting a demographic reality that affects, and is influenced by people across all age groups getting older. As such, an ageing population is not an older people’s issue, but an issue for society as a whole.

### Age sector networks as an example of effective age sector service provision

In this report, COPNI uses the age sector networks as an example of effective intervention that contributes strategically to the principles of the WHO age-friendly framework.<sup>137</sup> COPNI advocates for the identification and scaling up of best practice across all age sector organisations. With this, COPNI is not advocating for the development of ASNs in isolation, but rather, as part of a wider effort to increase resilience and sustainability within the entire age sector.

Within its strategic planning, the government should not only look at ASNs, but other organisations supporting older people locally. This could include, for example, networks such as the Healthy Living Centres,<sup>138</sup> or the U3A.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>137</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.) [The WHO age-friendly cities framework](#).

<sup>138</sup> Healthy Living Centre Alliance (2025) [Health Living Centre Alliance](#).

<sup>139</sup> U3A (2025) [Home](#).

## APPENDIX 3. LOCAL AGE-FRIENDLY INFRASTRUCTURE

### The role of ASNs and PHA age-friendly coordinators

Testimonies provided by age sector network representatives and age-friendly coordinators are included throughout this report. It is important to differentiate ASNs and age-friendly coordinators. ASNs operate as independent age sector organisations, whereas the activities of age-friendly coordinators sit within the remit of local councils. ASNs are organisations with multiple funders and can be staffed by volunteers or employees. In contrast, age-friendly coordinators are individual paid roles in each council area funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA).

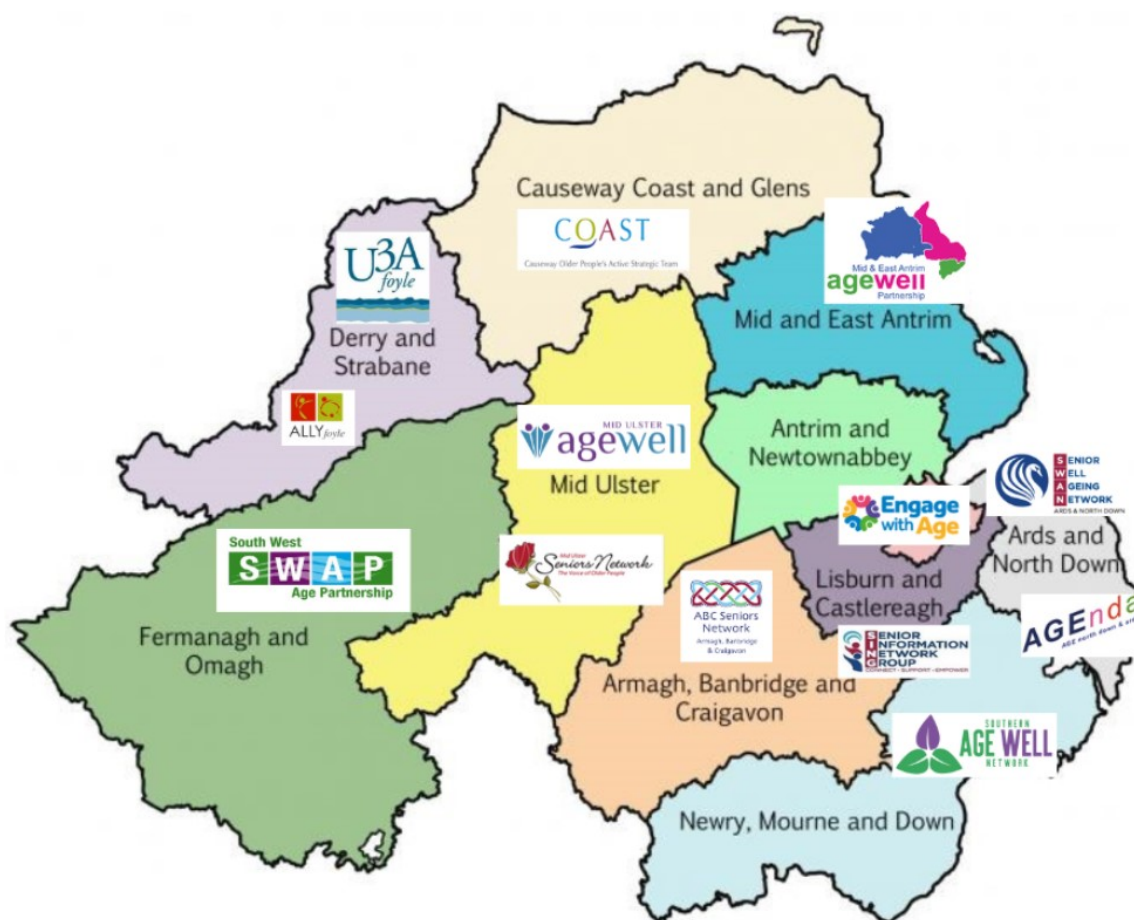
The services offered by ASNs and age-friendly coordinators can vary. For example, ASNs are more likely to provide services to older people and to offer support to older people's representative groups. Age-friendly coordinators often focus on specific council-led strategic intervention. ASNs and age-friendly coordinators both engage directly with older people to gain their feedback. More detail on both ASNs and the age-friendly coordinator role is provided below.

### Overview of the age sector networks

The different organisations operating as age sector networks in Northern Ireland are set out in the figure below:



**FIGURE 2.** Map of ASNs in Northern Ireland



- **Antrim and Newtownabbey:** Newtownabbey Senior Citizens Forum
- **Ards and North Down:** Age north down and ards (AGEnda), Senior Well Ageing Network (SWAN)
- **Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon:** ABC Senior Network (ABCSN)
- **Belfast:** Engage with Age, Volunteer Now North Belfast Senior Citizens Forum
- **Causeway Coast and Glens:** Causeway Older Active Strategic Team (COAST)
- **Derry City and Strabane:** In development and includes Forum for Ageing Better (FAB), U3A, Ally Foyle
- **Fermanagh and Omagh:** South West Age Partnership (SWAP)
- **Lisburn and Castlereagh:** Senior Information Network Group (SING)
- **Mid and East Antrim:** Mid and East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP)
- **Mid Ulster:** Mid Ulster Age Well Partnership, Mid Ulster Senior Network
- **Newry, Mourne and Down:** Southern Age Well Network (SAWN), Down Senior Forum

To offer an indicative view ASNs generally:

**Provide support to older people and older people's representative groups:** ASNs develop community and voluntary infrastructure and support their governance. ASNs can also provide a range of vital services such as befriending schemes, good morning calls, advice and support, and handyperson services. They can offer group activities such as arts and crafts, and various networking opportunities.<sup>140</sup>

**Empower older people in their decision-making:** ASNs raise the profile of the age-friendly agenda<sup>141</sup> and share guidance with older people so they can manage their own health.<sup>142</sup> For specific events, such as the General Election, ASNs provide information to encourage informed decision-making.<sup>143</sup>

**Connect older people to government:** ASNs connect forums of older people with age-friendly infrastructure in local government.<sup>144</sup> ASNs also contribute to consultations affecting older people<sup>145</sup> and reflect the views of older people at the council-level.<sup>146</sup> ASNs host an Age Sector Network Exchange, discussing issues relevant to older people.<sup>147</sup> ASNs also contribute to Northern Ireland-level groups such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ageing and Older People,<sup>148</sup> and the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland.<sup>149</sup>

**Participate in knowledge exchange events:** Representatives from ASNs attend local and national knowledge exchange events, such as the Best Practice UK Network of Age Friendly Communities Conference in November 2023, engaging with national stakeholders and identifying what works in different regional settings.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News February 2023](#).

<sup>141</sup> Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (2023) [Briefing paper for APG on Ageing and Older People](#).

<sup>142</sup> Age NI (2024) [Signpost Express Age Sector News March 2024](#).

<sup>143</sup> Age NI (2024) [Signpost Express Age Sector News July 2024](#).

<sup>144</sup> Age NI (2024) [Signpost Express Age Sector News April 2024](#).

<sup>145</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News June 2023](#).

<sup>146</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News February 2023](#).

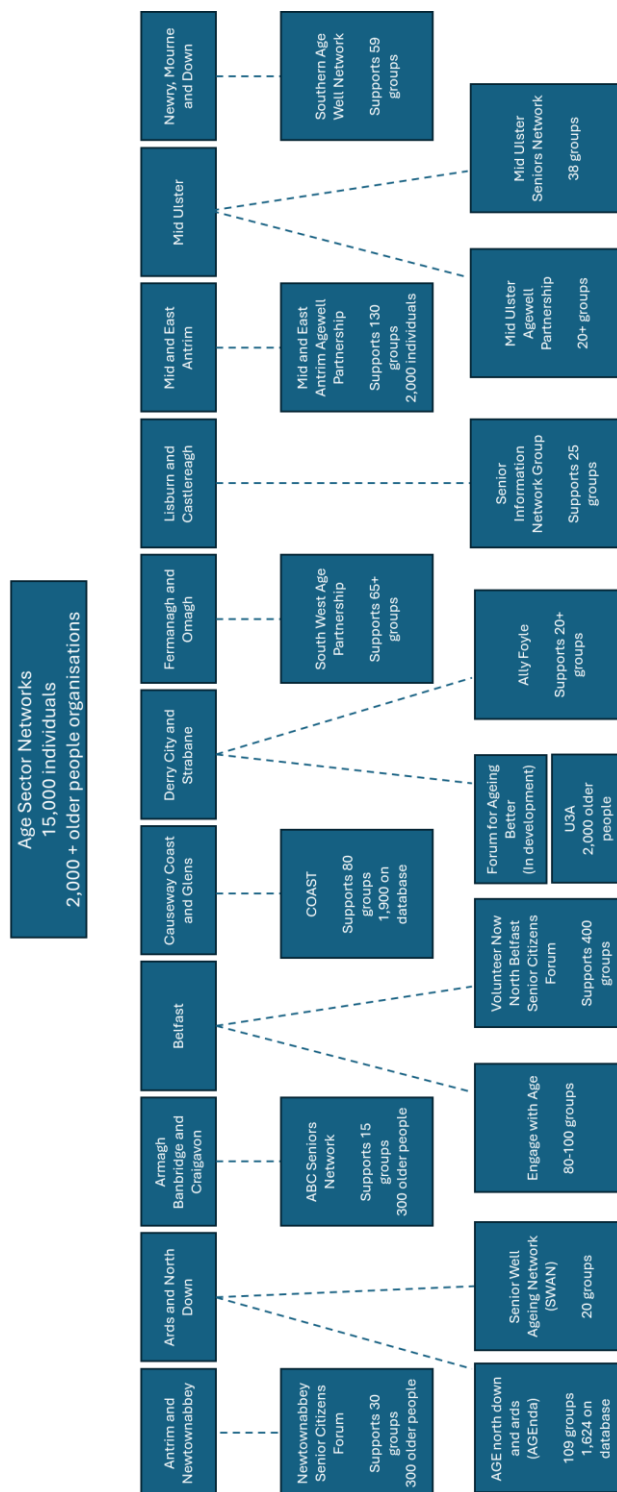
<sup>147</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News March 2023](#).

<sup>148</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News November 2023](#).

<sup>149</sup> Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland (2023) [Briefing paper for APG on Ageing and Older People](#).

<sup>150</sup> Age NI (2023) [Signpost Express Age Sector News December 2023](#).

FIGURE 3. ASN reach



### The context of the local age sector ecosystem

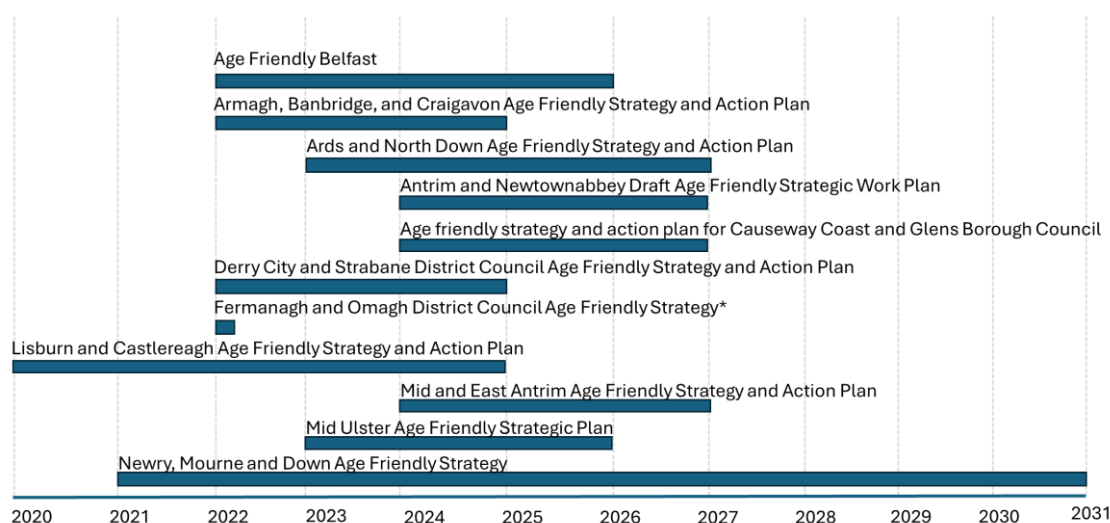
It is important to recognise that the make-up of the age sector ecosystem will vary significantly between council areas. For example, each ASN will have unique offerings under its own governance model. While ASNs share a general aim, it is important to

note that each has grown responsively in the context of a constrained funding environment to meet the needs of older people in their respective regions. As such, ASNs can vary in size, structure, resource, service provision and funding model.

*“[One ASN] will be an over 50s forum... [others can be] a service provider. So, they’re very different... Some forums are constituted... [others are] not... In my area, the ASN provides floating support, good morning calls, and signposting... Some of the other areas would work with older people’s groups and do the arts and crafts and help them with funding applications”*  
- age-friendly coordinator

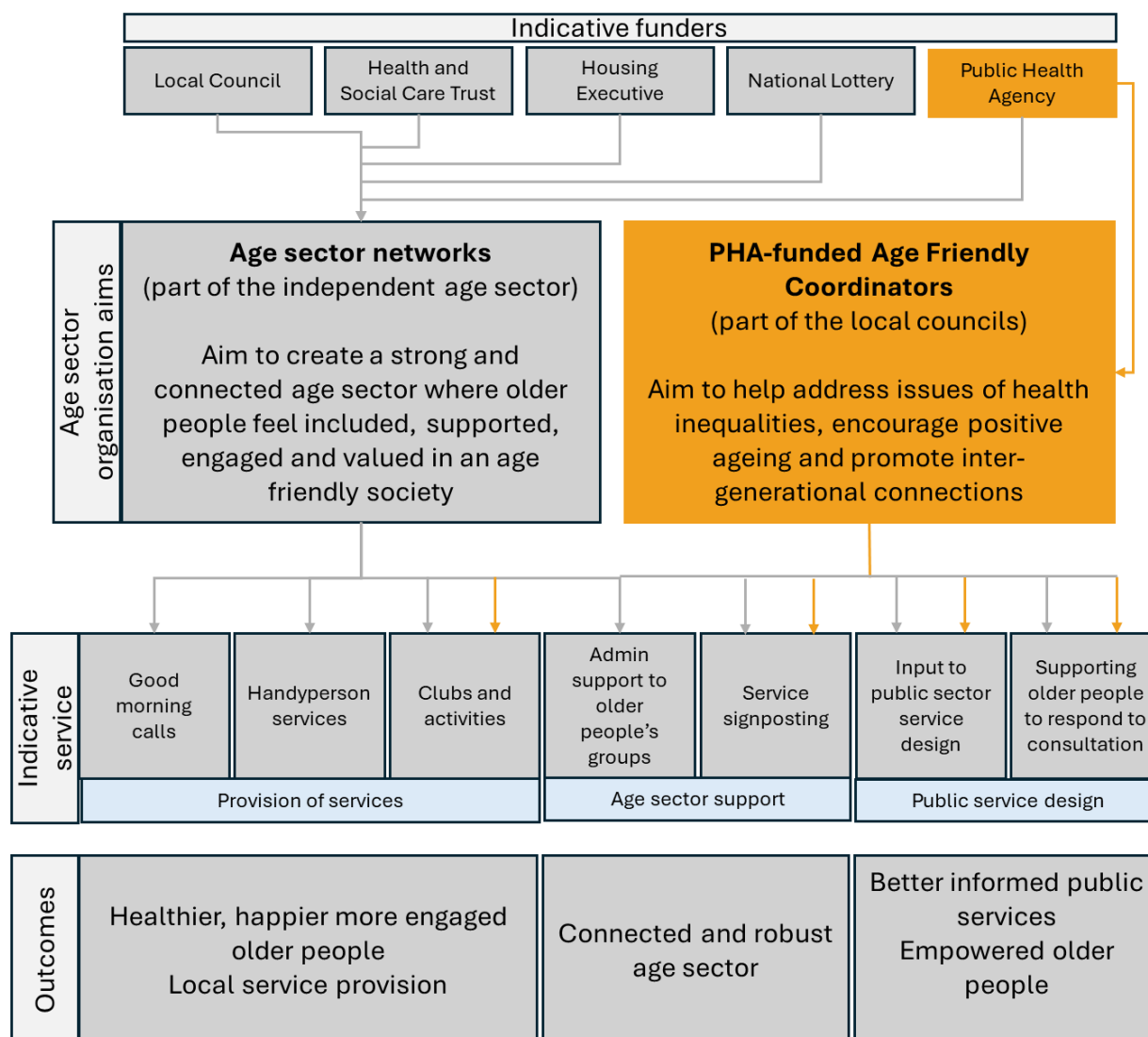
Similarly, the remit and approach of age-friendly coordinators are shaped by the specific policy objectives of the council area, with the role often sitting in different departments in individual councils. Based on the focus of councils, or individual managers, this can influence how age-friendly coordinators carry out their duties. Each council strategy also has its own timeframe for delivery, which is another variable to consider.

**FIGURE 4. Timeline of council-level age-friendly strategies**



## Collaboration between ASNs and age-friendly coordinators

For the reasons outlined above, it is not possible to present a comprehensive overview of how ASNs operate with age-friendly coordinators in all council areas. However, an indicative view is provided below, that presents a general overview of typical funders, aims, services, and outcomes derived from both ASNs and age-friendly coordinator activity. Again, it is important to note that this is a simplified view to support understanding only.

**FIGURE 5.** Indicative overview of ASN and age-friendly coordinator roles in the council-level age sector ecosystem



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