

14 October 2024

Michelle O'Neill, MLA,
First Minister
Emma Little-Pengelly,
Deputy First Minister,
The Executive Office,
Stormont Castle,
Belfast,
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By email: ps.ministers@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk

Dear First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Commissioner for Older People and the Chief Executive of Age NI have come together to express their disappointment and concern that the ageing population of Northern Ireland is ignored in the draft Programme for Government. Both organisations demand that the importance of a strategic and co-ordinated approach to the challenges of an ageing society is recognised by the government, in order to harnesses the opportunities of this change and to increase the quality of life for all.

Responding to the ageing population

The Issue:

For several decades, fewer children have been born here, while we are increasingly living longer lives. The proportion of older people in relation to the total population increases every year and will continue to grow over the following four decades. One in six people in Northern Ireland is aged 65+ and projections from NISRA indicate that this is likely to rise to one in five by 2030 and one in four by 2040.

The fact that we are living longer is a cause for celebration and creates benefits for society through the valuable role older people play in families, communities and the workforce. But demographic ageing also presents serious challenges to our public institutions and the economy which require adequate preparation. The proportion of people at work in Northern Ireland will decrease, while the number of people in need of public services and benefits will sharply increase. There will be an increased need for pensions, health and social care, accessible, age friendly communities, transport and housing, plus other supports.

The challenges of demographic ageing require a whole-of-government approach to planning that prioritises the need of older people now so that we can be a prosperous, cohesive society well into the future.

Our Proposed Action:

We must harness the benefits of a larger population of older people. To this end, the NI Executive must develop a cross-departmental **strategic plan for an ageing**

society. This high-level plan will require targeted data collection and analysis to examine the state of ageing in Northern Ireland, how our older population fare economically and how they engage with public services.

There is an urgent need **for transformation of and investment in health and social care** services to support our ageing population. This should be an immediate priority with adequate resources allocated to the Department of Health to enable transformation, not just to manage existing pressures. In particular, investment in social care is urgently required as demand for services already far exceeds the system's capacity.

It is more important than ever that older people are protected from discrimination. The Executive Office should bring forward new legislation to prohibit **age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services**, in line with previous commitments in the Programme for Government 2011-2015 and the 2020 New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Northern Ireland has the highest level of economic inactivity of people aged 50+ in the UK. Older workers face barriers to stay in employment, while they are forgotten by the Economic and Skills strategies. Many older people say they want to remain in work or retain employment in a different sector. Amid an aged population, **provision, support and protection for older workers** must be central to help employers facing recruitment difficulties, and to guarantee that older people are free to work for as long as they wish.

We urge the Executive to listen to the voices of older people and ensure that this Programme for Government does not miss a vital opportunity to respond to the challenges of our ageing population and prioritise building a society where we can all thrive as we age. The Commissioner and Age NI, on behalf of older people and their families and carers, call on Ministers to fully develop a 10th PFG priority to address the needs of an ageing society.

Yours sincerely



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