



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment
Department for Communities
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
County Antrim
BT2 7EG

17 February 2025

**RE: Review of Architecture and the Built Environment Policy - Stakeholder
Questionnaire**

Dear Sir / Madam

The office of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) agrees with the vision of the 2006 Architecture and the Built Environment (A+BE) Policy for Northern Ireland, that Northern Ireland should be “an attractive, healthy, safe and sustainable built environment which functions efficiently and enriches the experience of living for everyone in Northern Ireland – through good architecture, landscape and urban planning our cities, towns and neighbourhoods can be made more inspiring and welcoming.” COPNI hopes that an updated strategy will have a similar ambition, and that both the strategy and its Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) will consider the needs of older people, helping to transition Northern Ireland’s built environment to prepare for its growing, older population.

COPNI outlines how Northern Ireland’s population will age in its report *At the Centre of Government Planning: The Programme for Government and Preparing for an Ageing Population*. For example, in 2024 one in four people were of pension age. By 2040, this will increase to one in three, and by 2070 one in two people will be of pension age. While the report does not focus on the built environment, it calls for an appropriate and coordinated response to population ageing. In this regard, COPNI believes that the A+BE policy and the MAG can act as catalysts for identifying and promoting inclusive design and shaping healthy ageing habits in Northern Ireland in the years ahead.

There is a growing body of evidence that outlines the ways that an ageing population is impacting how people navigate society. Barriers have emerged, and if left

unaddressed inequality will grow. Dependent on postcode and infrastructure, some older people will not be able to live as full a life as their peers in more appropriately designed areas. In light of this, and the limited mention of older people in the previous strategy, COPNI has five recommendations for the future A+BE strategy:

- that there is a representative on the MAG that can speak with authority on the needs of older people;
- that expert findings inform the objectives of the strategy, that the implications of population ageing on the built environment are explicitly outlined in the strategy, and that there is a commitment to address these issues;
- that, where appropriate, partners and stakeholders are provided with evidence of need in relation to population ageing;
- that the strategy does its utmost to place accessibility and preparing for population ageing at the centre of design decisions;
- that the strategy includes a yearly action plan and progress report that is available to the public.

To provide a starting point, COPNI outlines some of the ways the built environment is impacting older people. COPNI hopes that this information benefits the design of your future strategy.

Access to the public realm

COPNI's previous 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.¹ This likely impacts wellbeing. In Northern Ireland, people aged fifty and over are consistently less likely to be active than other age groups.² Over a third of older people (36%) are not satisfied with walking infrastructure.³ People aged 75 and older in Northern Ireland are also more likely to

¹ COPNI (2024) *Are you ageist? Older people's perception of ageism in Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/are-you-ageist-copni-report-on-ageism-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

² Northern Ireland Executive (2024) *Sports and physical activity*. Available at: https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/executiveofficenil/pfg_wellbeing_dashboard.html?indicator=sports+and+physical+activity

³ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023) *Transport Accessibility Statistics Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/transport-accessibility-statistics-ni-infographic.pdf>

feel lonely than any other age group.⁴ Murtagh and others (2021)⁵ offer insight into the role of the public realm in supporting the wellbeing of older people, but note that this is at risk due to trends in pavement use:

The public realm is more than functional for older people. It is a site of encounter... [Yet] footpaths are increasingly commercialised (with extended restaurants and bars, advertising boards and street performers); surfaces are a fall risk; cars are parked over the kerb; and older people compete with runners, cyclists and prams for space.

Competing ambitions of private development

Similarly, there are challenges in balancing the needs of the population with the ambitions of commercial developers. The study by Murtagh and others outlines the issues that have emerged with the “youthification” and “studentification” of Belfast, which is often antithetical to age-friendly design:

You’ve had a big push toward student accommodation in the city centre . . . so Belfast will become a very young centre and maybe older as you go further. The city centre tends to be asset rich so older people’s housing (with) good access to amenities, good access to pharmacies, hospitals and shops and the sort of stuff to reduce isolation is needed.

In terms of planning policy, existing need and society’s rapidly evolving needs should be considered. As Murtagh and others concisely note:

It is not the slow nature of urban change that explains constrained options for older people, but everyday decisions and redevelopment programmes that accumulate to reshape the city centre as a place for some people over others.

⁴ The Executive Office (2023) *Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23*. Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/wellbeing-in-northern-ireland-report-2022-23.pdf>

⁵ Murtagh et al. (2021) *Planning for an ageing city: place, older people and urban restructuring*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23748834.2021.1914506>

COPNI agrees with this sentiment and maintains that the current standard of decision-making in Northern Ireland in both rural and urban areas must be improved. It is vital that an expert-led MAG, with support from partners such as COPNI and the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) reimagines decision-making on public planning in a way that meets the needs of older people today, and the entirety of our rapidly ageing population in the future.

Access to transport

The UK's Department for Transport outlines the importance of accessible transport infrastructure. It:

Is crucial for ensuring that disabled people are not excluded from playing a full role in society... [and supports] people travelling with small children... people with temporary mobility problems (e.g. a leg in plaster), and many older people. Good, inclusive design benefits all users, including those who have non-visible disabilities.⁶

It is worth noting that older households in particular, are more reliant on public transport than other age groups. They are less likely to have access to a car.^{7 8} They are more likely to experience mobility deprivation.⁹ They are also more likely to have a resident with a long-term health condition.¹⁰

It is important that transport's role in access to the public realm is considered in the strategy. In the most recent budget, the Department for Infrastructure reduced Translink funding, spending on road maintenance, and ceased the annual programme

⁶ Department for Transport (2021) *Inclusive Mobility: A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure*. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61d32bb7d3bf7f1f72b5ff2/inclusive-mobility-a-guide-to-best-practice-on-access-to-pedestrian-and-transport-infrastructure.pdf>

⁷ Census (2021) *Car or Van Availability by Lifestage (Household)*. Available at: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=HOUSEHOLD&v=HH_CAR_VAN_TC5&v=HH_LIFESTAGE_AGG15

⁸ Department for Infrastructure (2020) *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth report*. Available at: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Finfrastructure%2Ftsni-in-depth-report-2020-tables.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

⁹ Government Office for Science (2015) *How can transport provision and associated built environment infrastructure be enhanced and developed to support the mobility needs of individuals as they age?* Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81973b40f0b6230269820f/gs-15-7-future-ageing-transport-er23.pdf>

¹⁰ Census (2021) *Health Problem or Disability (Long-term) by Age*. Available at: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=DISABILITY_DVO&v=AGE_SYOA

of footway enhancement on poor footways.¹¹ This decision exacerbates longer-term issues linked with transport and its role in supporting access to the public realm. Murtagh and others state:

Translink argued that public transport was the ‘weakest link in the chain’ [of public realm design] because they cannot always get access to footpaths for low floor buses, integrate with sheltered accommodation or plan more flexible services where there are known concentrations of older people. For transit and health authorities, this is the type of programme coupling that is needed to think through, in problem stream terms, how a city might be future-proofed. Similarly, housing officials argued that we need to re-examine transport options for older people, the growth in suburban mobility and how roads, footpaths and public spaces will need to be re-imagined.

Health

Census data suggests there is growing health inequality in Northern Ireland.¹² Data also suggests that as we age, the likelihood of developing a limiting long-term health condition also increases. The most common conditions limiting people across the population include long-term pain or discomfort (12% total population, 27% 65 and over), mobility issues (11%, 29%), and shortness of breath or difficult breathing (10%, 19%).¹³ Failure to make the public realm accessible to those with additional needs in the present will impact a larger proportion of the population in the years ahead.

The link between health and environment should be recognised in the strategy. Research conducted by academics in Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), in

¹¹ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) *July 2024 COPNI response to Department for Infrastructure Budget 2024/25 Equality Impact Assessment Public Consultation*. Available at: <https://copni.org/publications-research/consultation-responses>

¹² A higher proportion of the total population and a higher proportion of the older population reporting either “good” or “very good” or “bad” or “very bad” health in 2021 compared to 2011. Calculated using Census (2011) General health by broad age bands. Available at: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nisra.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fstatistics%2Fce/nsus-2011-commissioned-table-ct0551ni.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK> and Census (2021) General health by broad age bands. Available at: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nisra.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fstatistics%2Fce/nsus-2021-ms-d01.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

¹³ Census (2021) *Health Problem of Disability (Long-term) by Age -86 Categories by Health Condition [Various]*. Available at: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=DISABILITY_DVO&v=AGE_SYOA_85

partnership with Age NI, outlines the tangible impact environment has on healthy ageing:

In 2022, males living in the most deprived 20% of areas in Northern Ireland could expect to live 7.2 years less than those living in the 20% least deprived areas. Females living in the most deprived areas could expect to live 4.8 years less than females in the least deprived areas... Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) stands at 61.2 years for males, and 62.7 for females. Again, the gap between the most deprived and least deprived areas is notable: males in the most deprived areas can expect 12.2 fewer healthy years... Females in the most deprived areas can expect 14.2 fewer healthy years... What this means is that the forms of inequality and disadvantage that people are exposed to can have a real and measurable impact on how long they live, and how healthy that life is. It also signals in very real terms that the age group which bears the brunt of the cumulative effects of the Social Determinants of Health - the people who sit on the "impact end" of health inequalities - are older people.¹⁴

Where possible, the strategy should recognise the link between health issues and environment. What this means for access to transport and a person's ability to travel should also be considered. In Northern Ireland, a fifth of all adults (20%) report difficulty travelling in due to a physical disability or long-term health problem.¹⁵ This figure increases in older age groups, up to 35% of people over 65. Moreover, for older people in rural communities, the distance between the home or community and the nearest hospital or GP surgery was an issue due to the lack of appropriate transport.

COPNI hopes that this response supports your planning at this early stage. Do not hesitate to reach out if we can assist any further in this process.

¹⁴ Hunter, R. (2024). *Healthy aging in rural and coastal areas of Northern Ireland: challenges and solutions*. Available at: https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/621636052/Healthy_Ageing_in_Rural_and_Coastal_Areas_of_Northern_Ireland_Challenges_and_Solutions.pdf

¹⁵ Department for Infrastructure (2021) *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-Depth Report 2021*. Available at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/tsni-in-depth-report-2021.pdf>



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Many thanks

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