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RE: Consultation Response on the Establishment of a Just Transition Commission

Dear Sir / Madam

I congratulate your recent scoping work to establish a commission to guide a just transition in Northern Ireland. There is clear reference to best practice, and an understanding of the overall magnitude and extent of the challenges to be addressed. Your reference to partnership and collaborative working with other commissions is welcome, and the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) is pleased to be recognised on your list. Specific to transport, it is also vital that the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) is included among your future collaborators. IMTAC is the main source of advice to Government in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of disabled and older people.¹ IMTAC will therefore be able to offer specialist knowledge on mobility issues as they relate to older people and disabled people.

Your briefing refers to many areas of strategic importance to COPNI, for example, social inclusion, fuel poverty, equality, and an inclusive labour market. Each of these areas disproportionately impact older people. Currently, for example, people over 75 report higher levels of loneliness than other age groups.² Older people are more likely to experience fuel poverty, and as mentioned in your consultation document, face higher costs for home repair and maintenance.³ Older people in Northern Ireland are also less protected by the law than in any other region in the UK and Ireland, due to an absence of legislation against discrimination

¹ Imtac (2024) *About Imtac*. Available at: <https://www.imtac.org.uk/about-imtac>

² The Executive Office (2023) *Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23*. Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execcoffice/wellbeing-in-northern-ireland-report-2022-23.pdf>

³ The Consumer Council (2022) *A Review of Fuel Poverty Levels in Northern Ireland*. Available at: https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Research_Report_Review_of_Fuel_Poverty_Levels_in_NI_1.pdf

in the provision of goods, facilities, and services.⁴ Notably, Northern Ireland's labour market has also started to shrink in recent years due to population ageing.⁵

Each of these issues will only become more prominent, and the negative implications more apparent, as Northern Ireland's population ages. Northern Ireland's population is ageing at a faster rate than at any stage in its history. Whereas historically, Northern Ireland has had a lower proportion of older people in comparison to other parts of the UK, in the coming decades, the rate of ageing will increase in Northern Ireland to the extent that this gap will close. As such, rapid societal change due to population ageing will coincide with that of significant disruptive climate change. Intervention to support a just transition should therefore be integrally linked to intervention to support an ageing population.

COPNI has advised the Northern Ireland Executive Office that an ageing population will fundamentally change how our society operates. COPNI's argument is set out in the report *At the Centre of Government Planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population*.⁶ In this report, the implications of population ageing are highlighted as a vital consideration for longer-term government planning. As this significant population change will transform how society operates on a fundamental level, COPNI recommends in its report that the realities of an older population are central components of all government decision-making across departments. COPNI maintains that it is only through coordinated action that the needs of an ageing population can be met.

In a similar vein, COPNI would suggest that for any transition to be truly just, the reality of an ageing population must be taken into consideration. As Northern Ireland takes the fundamental steps to create a more sustainable society, such a transformation must also acknowledge and plan for the realities of an older population. In contrast, in the report *Just Transition Commission: A national mission for a fairer, greener Scotland*,⁷ there appears to be limited acknowledgement of demographic ageing, and the impact that this will have on how

⁴ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) *Inquiry into Gaps in Equality Legislation*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/August-2024-COPNI-response-to-the-Committee-for-the-Executive-Office-Inquiry-into-Gaps-in-Equality-Legislation.pdf>

⁵ Ulster University (2024) *Spare capacity in the Northern Ireland labour market – Paper 1*. Available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2024/spare-capacity-in-the-northern-ireland-labour-market/Ni-spare-capacity_Real-unempt_2024.pdf

⁶ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) *At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/At-the-Centre-of-Government-Planning-The-Programme-for-Government-and-preparing-for-an-ageing-population.pdf>

⁷ Scottish Government (2021) *Just Transition Commission: A national mission for a fairer and greener Scotland*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2021/03/transition-commission-national-mission-fairer-greener-scotland/documents/transition-commission-national-mission-fairer-greener-scotland/transition-commission-national-mission-fairer-greener-scotland/govscot%3Adocument/transition-commission-national-mission-fairer-greener-scotland.pdf>

future generations live. Notably, this document references population ageing and older people just once, in the context of intervention to address Scotland's ageing agriculture sector, and to ensure older workers can remain on their property when leaving the industry. As set out in COPNI's *At the Centre of Government Planning* report, an older population will impact all aspects of society, and while COPNI has highlighted similar issues facing the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland,⁸ it is important that the broad range of issues that will emerge with an ageing population are considered in DAERA's approach to a just transition.

To ensure a comprehensive consideration of the impacts of an ageing population, COPNI would advise reviewing and tailoring existing toolkits and best practice that recognise the overlap between the needs of an ageing population and just transition. The European Commission's *Centring older people in regional transformation: a toolkit for just transition regions*,⁹ outlines several areas of overlap which include health, infrastructure, and labour. Guidance by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on age-friendly practice can also inform the development of interventions to support a just transition. WHO guidance covers eight domains of public life, including: community and healthcare, transportation, housing, social participation, outdoor spaces and buildings, respect and social inclusion, civil participation and employment, and communication and information.¹⁰ With proper consideration, the overlap between each of these domains and a just transition can be identified. As such, this guidance, and the WHO's *National programmes for age-friendly cities and communities: a guide*¹¹ can be valuable tools to inform intervention, ensuring that the needs of older people are met within a just transition.

Finally, by incorporating aspects of age-friendly practice into future just transition plans, new opportunities for joined-up working with age sector stakeholders will emerge. Potential collaborators include the eleven age-friendly coordinators in Northern Ireland at the council-level, and the different age sector networks that operate across Northern Ireland. These organisations can connect the Just Transition Commission team with older people in rural and

⁸ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) *Review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the schedule of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/August-2024-COPNI-response-to-DAERA-review-of-Rural-Needs-Act-NI-2016-schedule.pdf>

⁹ European Commission (2023) *Centring older people in regional transformations: A toolkit for just transition regions*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/funding/just-transition-fund/toolkit-centring-older-people-in-regional-transformations.pdf

¹⁰ World Health Organisation (n.d.) *The WHO Age-friendly Cities Framework*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/funding/just-transition-fund/toolkit-centring-older-people-in-regional-transformations.pdf

¹¹ World Health Organisation (2023) *National programmes for age-friendly cities and communities: A guide*. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/366634/9789240068698-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

urban areas, offering extensive knowledge and infrastructure at the local level that can support intervention design and implementation.

COPNI welcomes all future engagement on issues relating to a just transition. Where possible we will facilitate collaboration with the wider age sector and offer our insight into your programme design where appropriate. Very many thanks for taking the first steps to address such an existential issue.

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