



Commissioner for Older People  
for Northern Ireland

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07.01.26

**Re: Consultation on the Draft Supporting People Strategic Intent 2026-2031**

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) draft Supporting People Strategic Intent. I offer this response on behalf of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI), Siobhan Casey.

Northern Ireland's population is ageing and is expected to do so at a faster rate than other regions of the United Kingdom. As the population continues to age, Northern Ireland's infrastructure is not keeping pace with the needs this demographic change creates. Many of our services, homes, transport systems, and community spaces were not designed to support mobility, accessibility and independence in later life. As such, older people continue to face unnecessary barriers to participation, increased loneliness and social isolation, as well as a greater reliance on health and social care services. In this context, it is increasingly important that older people have services and support available to enable them to age well.

The Supporting People Programme is one of such services, undoubtedly vital for many older people across Northern Ireland. By awarding organisations with grant-funding, the Programme enables the delivery of services that "provide housing related support and assistance to service users, thus enabling them to live more independently".<sup>1</sup> Housing-related matters are consistently raised with COPNI, and older people continually highlight the importance to them of being able to live at home for as long as possible. However, older people can experience factors that pose significant barriers to achieving this. For instance, older people are more likely to experience fuel poverty.<sup>2</sup> Poorly heated homes can lead to poor housing conditions, including damp, cold and mould. Given that older people are more likely to live with disabilities

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<sup>1</sup> NIHE (2024/25) '[Supporting People Annual Report](#)'.

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2016 highlights how experiences of fuel poverty increase with age. It also found that almost four out of ten households in which the Household Reference Person is aged 75 plus were in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. NISRA and NIHE (2016) '[House Condition Survey 2016, Appendix Tables, Tables 6.6](#)'.

or long-term health conditions,<sup>3</sup> poor living environments can exacerbate such existing health issues. As well as this, many homes are inaccessible to older people. A lack of step-free entries, wide doorways, or level-access showers, for example, can present as barriers for older people, increasing their risk of falling or injuring themselves, and limiting their ability to perform daily tasks. COPNI's *At the Centre of Government Planning* report highlighted how "older people with reduced mobility are often forced into residential care due to excessive delays in home adaptations".<sup>4</sup> Given these issues, COPNI appreciates the essential services the Supporting People Programme provides for older people to ensure they can live independently and safely at home for as long as possible.

Under legislation, COPNI's primary role is to "safeguard and promote the interests of older people".<sup>5</sup> We have therefore reviewed the Strategic Intent document through a lens that ensures older people's needs, interests and wellbeing are upheld, safeguarded and promoted. By way of preliminary remarks, COPNI is disappointed by the Strategic Intent document. Given that its purpose is to provide a "framework to prioritise the work of the Housing Executive in the continuation and development of the SP [Supporting People] Programme over the next five years",<sup>6</sup> it is strikingly brief and lacks detail on the specific actions that will be taken to support service users. The document falls short of providing the clarity needed to demonstrate how these intentions will translate into tangible improvements to older people's lives. This is concerning and does not provide COPNI with confidence that the needs of older people will be addressed by the Programme over the next five years.

Nevertheless, COPNI welcomes the four Strategic Aims of the Supporting People Programme and offers the below comments.

### **Strategic Aim 1: Working Towards Closing the Gap Between Need for Service and Supply**

As discussed, our population is ageing and with that comes an increasing demand for support services for older people. As such, COPNI welcomes Strategic Aim 1 and its priorities to work towards closing the gap between need for the Supporting People Programme and supply. In our experience, when supply fails to meet need, there can be disproportionate impacts for

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<sup>3</sup> Census 2021 results found that 56.8% of those aged 65 plus in Northern Ireland live with a long-term health problem or disability. NISRA (2022) '[Census 2021, Main Statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical Bulletin, Health, Disability and Unpaid Care](#)'.

<sup>4</sup> COPNI (2024) '[At the Centre of Government Planning: The Programme for Government and Preparing for an Ageing Population](#)'.

<sup>5</sup> Commissioner for Older People Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

<sup>6</sup> NIHE (2025) '[Supporting People Strategic Intent 2026-2031](#)'.

older people including deterioration of existing health conditions or disabilities, greater feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and an increase in older people moving to hospital or residential care. Thus, working to close the gap between need and supply will bring significant benefits for older people. Namely, timely access to support, a limited likelihood of experiencing preventable health decline or loneliness, and the ability to remain active and engaged members of their communities. Such intervention will contribute to older people's independence and safety in their homes. COPNI therefore welcomes each of the workstreams identified under this Aim but is particularly interested in the Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) which will identify "current housing support needs by theme, demographic and geographic areas and mapped against service provision to inform targeted strategic development of Supporting People services".<sup>7</sup> Given the diversity of need among older people, a SNA would provide an evidence base to understand where need is most acute and the nature of support required. This would enable the services provided by the Supporting People Programme to be targeted and responsive, in ways that address gaps, reduce inequalities and maximise impact. COPNI looks forward to its development and operationalisation.

## **Strategic Aim 2: Improved Outcomes for Service Users**

Older people can face disproportionate impacts when services fail to meet their needs. COPNI therefore welcomes a specific Aim under the Programme to improve outcomes for service users. Doing so places their needs and experiences at the centre of the Programme, ensuring it is judged on its impact on people's lives. Considering this, COPNI would welcome concrete actions under this Aim on how outcomes for service users will be improved in practice. As currently framed, the priorities emphasise best practice, as well as measuring, monitoring and reviewing outcomes, while lacking detail on any proposed changes or opportunities that could provide tangible benefits for service users. While COPNI recognises the importance of identifying best practice, it may be helpful for such priorities to be accompanied by actions that will translate into improvements in the lives of service users.

## **Strategic Aim 3: Drive Financial Efficiency and Agility in the Programme**

COPNI recognises the budgetary constraints the Supporting People Programme is working under. In our response to the Department for Communities' (DfC) equality impact assessment on its budget allocation for 2024/25, COPNI noted how the 6.4% increase in funding "is unlikely

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<sup>7</sup> NIHE (2025) '[Supporting People Strategic Intent 2026-2031](#)'.

to be sufficient to address demand for services”, especially because of the Programme’s budgetary freezes over the past few years. We also emphasized how a lack of adequate funding would disproportionately impact older service users.<sup>8</sup> COPNI therefore welcomes the priorities of Strategic Aim 4 and hopes they will ensure the Programme’s funding models are efficient, agile and robust enough to respond to the needs of service users.

#### **Strategic Aim 4: Collaborate with Strategic and Commissioning Partners, Including Health, to Improve Programme Impacts**

Older people are as diverse as any other age group not just in terms of age, ranging from 60 to over 100, but also in terms of demographic characteristics. Characteristics such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity influence the identities of older people, as well as their experiences of ageing. Health status, cognitive ability, life experiences, social engagement, living conditions, and religious beliefs, among others can also impact an older person’s identity. Therefore, collaboration between bodies such as government departments and other key stakeholders is key to ensure support services are responsive to the needs of older people. A multi-agency response avoids a one-size-fits-all approach and will help ensure the diversity of older people is reflected in the services on offer. Support must be tailorable and responsive to unique needs. As such, COPNI supports Strategic Aim 4 and its priorities.

In sum, COPNI is wholeheartedly supportive of the Supporting People Programme. It is essential to the lives of many older people, and we want the Programme to succeed. Its success (or its failure) will deliver real impacts for older people. We hope government and other key stakeholders continue to recognise its importance, especially when considering future budgetary allocations. COPNI will continue to highlight the need for adequate funding in our engagements with the DfC.

However, the Strategic Intent document is underwhelming. In COPNI’s view, it does not reflect the significance of the Programme for older people, among other service users. It is also not possible to fully assess the impact of the proposed intentions without greater clarity on resourcing, specific delivery mechanisms, and the actions that will be taken to transform ambitions into meaningful outcomes. That said, COPNI remains hopeful that the Programme, with its Strategic Intent, Strategic Aims and Support Programme Modernisation Project will achieve the positive impact for older people that is so clearly needed.

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<sup>8</sup> COPNI (2024) ‘[Response to Consultation on Department for Communities’ Budget 2024-25 Allowances](#)’.



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I would welcome the opportunity to discuss further this response or the Supporting People Strategic Intent, should it be necessary or helpful.

Yours faithfully

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