



Commissioner for Older People  
for Northern Ireland

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06/01/2025

## **RE: Consultation on Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland**

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing regarding the consultation on the Disability and Work strategy on behalf of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI).

The present strategy is of great interest to COPNI, due to its relevance to demographic ageing. Statistically, health issues and disabilities increase as people age,<sup>1</sup> and so does the number of people at work that experience a health issue or disability.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the proportion of individuals that are economically inactive due to a health issue (long-term or short-term) is also higher in old age.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in order to remove barriers for older workers and promote inclusivity in the labour market that benefits older people, this strategy is a crucial starting point.

This office welcomes the strategy and commends the department for its efforts. In particular, the strategy acknowledges past and existing failures in the inclusivity of disabled people in the Northern Ireland's labour market when compared to other regions. The department has also conducted positive and active engagement with a range of relevant stakeholders, and the strategy proposes to open an effective communication channel with these groups to ensure future collaboration and awareness of emerging issues. This office believes that these are all positive developments.

However, this office also believes that the strategy falls short in aspects such as an adequate analysis of older disabled people's issues and accountability, and this response aims to discuss them in detail.

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<sup>1</sup> NISRA 2021 Census, [Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) by Age - 8 Categories](#).

<sup>2</sup> NI Census 2021, [Employment History - 4 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Age - 7 Categories A](#).

<sup>3</sup> Source: [annual population survey - regional - economic inactivity by reasons](#). Selected data: Northern Ireland, by age groups, 12 months to June 2025.

## Older workers and disability

Older disabled workers represent the majority of disabled workers in Northern Ireland. Disabled workers older than 50 amounted to 51.3% of the total number of disabled workers in 2021,<sup>4</sup> which represented a substantial increase from the previous decade (45.3% in 2011).<sup>5</sup> The importance of a disability and work strategy for older people is higher than for any other age group.

Older age groups are generally growing faster than younger ones in Northern Ireland and the share and number of employed persons older than 50 has grown consistently in the past two decades. Workers older than 50 amounted to approximately 80% of the total growth of our workforce over the past twenty years, and they currently amount to a third of the Northern Ireland's workforce, up from a fifth twenty years ago.<sup>6</sup>

**TABLE 1.** Percentage of employed working-age persons by age<sup>7</sup>

Age	June 2005	June 2015	June 2025
16 to 24	15.14	10.74	11.53
25 to 49	63.05	60.86	55.15
50 and over	21.81	28.40	33.30

This tendency will continue in the coming decades. By 2040, the number of working age individuals older than 50 will grow by 5.3%, while the number of those younger than 50 will decrease (-1.1%).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the share of workers older than 50 is likely to grow even further in the coming years.

Essentially, the proportion of people at work who have a disability increases with age (see Table 2). Approximately, 6% of workers younger than 34 years of age have a long-term health problem or disability, while one out five workers older than 55 has a disability. The ageing of Northern Ireland's workforce will increase the number of people with disabilities at work, and the number of people with disabilities that will require support to remain at work.

<sup>4</sup> NISRA Census 2021 [Age - 10 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Employment History - 4 Categories](#) and NISRA Census 2021 [Age - 11 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Employment History - 4 Categories](#).

<sup>5</sup> NISRA Census 2011 [CT0495NI: provision of unpaid care by employment status by long term health problem or disability by age band by sex](#).

<sup>6</sup> The total number of people at work in Northern Ireland increased by 184,000 individuals between 2005 and 2025, while the number of people older than 50 at work increased by 145,700. Source: [annual population survey - regional - labour market status by age](#). Selected data: Northern Ireland, 12 months to June 2025 and 2005; employed persons by age.

<sup>7</sup> Source: [annual population survey - regional - labour market status by age](#). Selected data: Northern Ireland, 12 months to June 2025, 2015, and 2005

<sup>8</sup> NISRA [2024 Mid-Year Population Estimates - All areas - Population by sex and single year of age](#) and NISRA [2022-based population projections. Principal projection - population by age and sex](#).

**TABLE 2.** Proportion of workers with a health problem or disability<sup>9</sup>

Age	%
16-24	5.79
25-34	6.26
35-44	8.54
45-54	13.02
55-64	18.22
65+	27.21

Disabilities increase with age; older people are more likely to work while having a disability (see Table 3) and our population will age faster in the coming decades. Therefore, all these factors point to the need to pay special attention to the issue of older disabled workers and their specific and distinct issues in the labour market.

**TABLE 3.** Proportion of people with a health problem or disability who are employed<sup>10</sup>

Age	%
16-24	2.82
25-34	4.94
35-44	6.80
45-54	9.77
55-64	10.34
65+	2.84

### Barriers experienced by older disabled workers

Despite its emphasis on tailored support to meet individual needs, this office believes that the draft strategy does not pay enough attention to the needs of older disabled workers. This is apparent in the absence of targeted analysis of older disabled people's issues but is also evident in some of the commitments in the strategy, especially those related to skills and higher education (Commitments 4 and 6).

One important aspect is the distinction established between skills and education (Issues 4 and 6), which does not reflect the needs of older disabled people. The strategy makes a clear separation between skills development and learning programmes, on the one hand, and education on the other—the first one more broadly focused on the general population and the second one specifically aimed at younger people.

There is strong evidence suggesting that older people who leave employment due to a health condition or disability are more likely to have been employed in lower-skilled

<sup>9</sup> NI Census 2021, [Employment History - 4 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Age - 7 Categories A](#).

<sup>10</sup> NI Census 2021, [Employment History - 4 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Age - 7 Categories A](#).

occupations. The 2021 Census indicates that approximately 10% of workers aged over 45 are employed in “elementary occupations”—roles that often involve physical activity and require minimal qualifications. In contrast, among economically inactive individuals in the same age group who are inactive due to long-term health conditions or disabilities, around 22% were previously employed in elementary occupations (see Table 5).<sup>11</sup>

These figures indicate a correlation between occupation type, qualification level, and the likelihood of exiting the labour market due to health issues or disability. In other words, older workers in lower-skilled jobs are more likely to leave the labour market when they experience health problems. Additionally, older workers are less likely to receive workplace training.<sup>12</sup> For those with lower levels of education, this lack of training further undermines their employability.

**TABLE 4.** Employed population and inactive population (due to health) comparison<sup>13</sup>

	45-54 years		55-64 years		65+ years	
	Employed	Inactive (health)	Employed	Inactive (health)	Employed	Inactive (health)
Managers, directors and senior officials	11.9%	4.6%	10.7%	4.4%	12.5%	4.5%
Professional occupations	19.9%	5.2%	15.7%	5.1%	13.0%	8.0%
Associate professional and technical occupations	9.3%	5.1%	7.8%	4.6%	6.6%	4.3%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	12.7%	10.2%	12.7%	9.2%	10.1%	10.7%
Skilled trades occupations	12.4%	15.0%	14.4%	16.8%	22.9%	15.6%
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	9.8%	12.4%	10.6%	11.5%	8.2%	8.6%
Sales and customer service occupations	6.4%	12.9%	7.0%	11.3%	7.2%	9.6%
Process, plant and machine operatives	8.7%	14.2%	10.0%	15.1%	9.2%	15.7%
Elementary occupations	8.9%	20.5%	11.0%	22.1%	10.2%	23.0%

<sup>11</sup> NISRA Census 2021 [Age - 7 Categories A by Occupation \(Current\) - 10 Categories](#) and [Age - 7 Categories A by Economic Activity - 9 Categories by Occupation \(Former\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> Centre for Ageing Better (2024) [Work, The State of Ageing 2023-24](#).

<sup>13</sup> NISRA Census 2021, [Age - 7 Categories A by Occupation \(Current\) - 10 Categories](#) and [Age - 7 Categories A by Economic Activity - 9 Categories by Occupation \(Former\)](#).

Table 5 shows that, while the likelihood of being inactive in Northern Ireland due to a health issue more than doubles for those in elementary occupations, the share of individuals that are inactive due to health in more qualified professions is much lower.

The Centre for Ageing Better indicates that older people often need to temporarily leave the labour market—due to short-term illness, caring for others, or because of a redundancy—, with many of them wanting to return if adequate support is in place.<sup>14</sup> Education is a factor directly connected with the likelihood of retiring, and often determines whether or not older disabled people can stay at work (see Table 5). Good education and qualifications correlate with a higher likelihood of staying in the labour market or returning after a short absence. For this reason, higher education—and not only skills and short-term training—is highly relevant for older disabled workers.

Education for older disabled workers is often not taken into consideration, despite its substantial social and economic value. A person aged 60 today still has seven working age years ahead, while the working age years of a person aged 50 extend to almost two more decades—and older workers in Northern Ireland are more likely to work beyond pension age than any other UK region.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, a change of career is a completely feasible and realistic possibility for individuals who cannot continue to perform their current work and need a change of role due to a health issue. Planning for this, requires the inclusion of older disabled workers not only in skills development and access to apprenticeships but also creating pathways into further education.

## Accountability

In the past decade, the rate of older people with disabilities that remain at work has increased significantly.<sup>16</sup> As our labour market continues to age and older disabled people continue to find ways to remain at work, the number of workers with disabilities is likely to increase. This has important implications for the accountability commitments in the strategy.

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<sup>14</sup> Centre for Ageing Better (2024) [Work, The State of Ageing 2025](#).

<sup>15</sup> The number of individuals older than 65 that remain in employment in Northern Ireland is 14.2%. Source: [annual population survey - regional - labour market status by age](#). Data: by country, age (65+) and labour status (in employment).

<sup>16</sup> The rate of workers with disabilities aged 50-59 as a percentage of the total number of workers of this age group increased from 11.9% to 15.4% between 2011 and 2021. For those aged 60 to 69, the proportion grew from 17.6% to 21.4%. The age groups selected for this table have been chosen for comparison purposes. Only the group of those aged 50 to 59 and 60 to 69 was available in the 2011 Census. Source: NISRA Census 2011 [CT0495NI: provision of unpaid care by employment status by long term health problem or disability by age band by sex](#) and NISRA Census 2021 [Age - 10 Categories by Health Problem or Disability \(Long-term\) - 2 Categories by Employment History - 4 Categories](#).

While the strategy states its intention to align Northern Ireland closer to the other UK regions in terms of economic activity and employability rates of older workers, it proposes a ten-year goal that is far from optimistic.

The strategy proposes to increase the number of older workers by 50,000 individuals and to increase the employment rate of disabled workers to 50% by 2036.<sup>17</sup> While these goals appear bold, when compared with the recent behaviour of the labour market of Northern Ireland, they lack ambition. According to the draft strategy, the number of disabled workers grew in Northern Ireland by 47,000 individuals between 2013-14 and 2023-24.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the rate of disabled people at work grew significantly in the past ten years, from 32.8% in 2015<sup>19</sup> to 41.3% in 2025.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the strategy's goals equal the evolution of the labour market in the past decade.

The strategy proposes to measure success against these goals, and subsequent targets are dependent on achieving the primary objective—reducing unemployment among men and women, and across all age groups. However, based on the trends of the labour market in recent years and current rates of population ageing, it is entirely plausible that the 2036 targets of the strategy could be met without any strategic intervention. Consequently, this office considers these goals to be inadequate measurements of the strategy's success.

Therefore, this office believes that the proposed accountability measures should be further focused on the evaluation of the strategy's outcomes against its specific actions and stated commitments—for instance, regarding Commitments 4 and 6, the number of skills, apprenticeships and higher education positions achieved for disabled older people (and the proportion of the population benefitted) through the targeted support designed could be monitored. We hope that this approach is considered by The Disability and Work Council.

## Conclusion

The present draft strategy has several positive aspects and, as such, is welcomed by this office. The department has involved a great number of stakeholders dedicated to upholding the rights of people with disabilities, and it has also proposed a series of commitments, which—if achieved—would increase the prevalence of disabled people at work in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>17</sup> Department for Communities (2025) [Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland](#); page 85.

<sup>18</sup> Department for Communities (2025) [Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland](#); page 37.

<sup>19</sup> NISRA (2015) [Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey: January - March 2015](#); page 27.

<sup>20</sup> NISRA (2025) [Labour Force Survey Quarterly Tables: April – June 2025.xlsx](#); table 2.35.

However, despite positive signs, this office also believes that the strategy should have contained a greater focus on older disabled workers who will represent the majority of disabled workers in Northern Ireland in the coming years. A specific analysis of the barriers experienced by older disabled workers could have been more evident in the final draft of the strategy.



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