

COPNI

Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

Are you ageist?

Older people's perceptions of ageism
in Northern Ireland



REPORT



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

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Contents

Foreword	2
Executive summary	4
Introduction	10
About the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland	10
The purpose of this report	13
What is ageism?	16
The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland	22
Ageism in society	25
How media influences our perception of older people	25
Institutional ageism	28
Interpersonal ageism	32
Self-directed ageism	33
Ageism in healthcare	35
Ageism in the workplace	39
How older people view themselves	42
Recommendations	44
Methodology	46

Foreword

Northern Ireland's population is getting older, and this is impacting how people participate in society and avail of public services. As our population ages, tackling age-based discrimination, or ageism, will be central to ensuring Northern Ireland is a good place to grow old. Ageism, one of the most socially accepted forms of discrimination, is largely based on generalisations about an older person or older people that discount their life experience, personal views, or hopes for the future.



Travelling to each of the six counties in Northern Ireland, I spoke with diverse groups of older people to get a better understanding of how ageism impacts their lives. Unfortunately, I was familiar with many of the issues that were described to me at these events. I found that many people I spoke with felt their needs were not being met and their concerns not listened to.

Conversations that I had with older people at these events highlight how they often feel overlooked and excluded from society in later life. Reasons for this range from innocent oversights in personal interactions to systemic mismanagement of issues important to older people. Smaller acts of ageism include patronising language, or other unwelcome changes to behaviour that are motivated by perceptions about a person's age. More serious acts of ageism can impact the lives of older people and are often engrained within institutional structures and in services that we use. Examples that I discussed with older people include work culture in later life, digital exclusion in an increasingly digitised society, perceptions of older people in media, access to transport, and the ability to access healthcare. Many of the older people that I spoke with highlighted multiple occurrences of ageism in their daily lives. For this reason, the testimonies provided throughout this report should not be viewed as isolated incidents, but rather, as common examples of the issues faced by older people as they interact with other people and societal structures.

Ageism is more apparent now than ever before. At the end of last year, I listened with dismay and disappointment to the evidence presented during the Covid-19 Inquiry. The evidence that was offered revealed shocking attitudes

among senior government officials that questioned the value of older lives and the contribution that older people make to society. These attitudes and remarks were not isolated. They echoed throughout society during the pandemic. I listened with horror one morning to a radio show during which the value of the lives of older people was debated among callers. These outrageous discussions exposed deep-seated views held by some, suggesting that as most older people are no longer in paid employment, they represent a burden or are superfluous to our society, and as such, should not be viewed the same as people in younger age groups.

More needs to be done to ensure we understand how ageism against older people negatively impacts the decisions made across our public institutions. With more awareness and informed decision-making, our services and infrastructure can be adjusted to meet the needs of older people.

An extensive review of public services, and increased engagement with older people and their representative groups is needed to ensure that the voices of older people are heard by government. With a newly formed Northern Ireland Executive, there must be renewed efforts to ensure that the rights of older people are protected, that they have the same access to services as other members of society, and that they have the ability to realise their personal ambitions as they age.

Safeguards must be put in place to protect the position of older people in society. Older people are impacted by legislative gaps in Northern Ireland, which, as a region, offers less protection against age-based discrimination than any other jurisdiction in the UK or Ireland. I reiterate my earlier calls for legislation to protect against age-based discrimination in Northern Ireland. In the

context of a new Executive, I also call for a specific first level Outcome for older people in the *Programme for Government* to ensure that all future policy accounts for the needs of our ageing population.

With these measures, older people will be better supported and will have more opportunities to realise their personal ambitions. Such steps are about setting the framework in which older people are facilitated rather than hindered to live the social, family, and work lives that they choose.

I am grateful to the older people who took part in each of my roundtable events and those who contributed to our survey. This report offers an overview of ageism and the experiences of older people living in Northern Ireland. It is my hope that society and government respond to the voices of older people who are central to this report by working with renewed vigour to tackle ageism and make ours a society in which we can all age well.

Eddie Lynch
Commissioner for Older People for
Northern Ireland

Executive summary

Within this report, the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) explores older people's perceptions of ageism within society, offering insight into where it can occur and how it can impact the lives of older people.

Ageism is the term used to describe discrimination against someone based on their actual or perceived age, and it can occur at three levels:

Institutional ageism

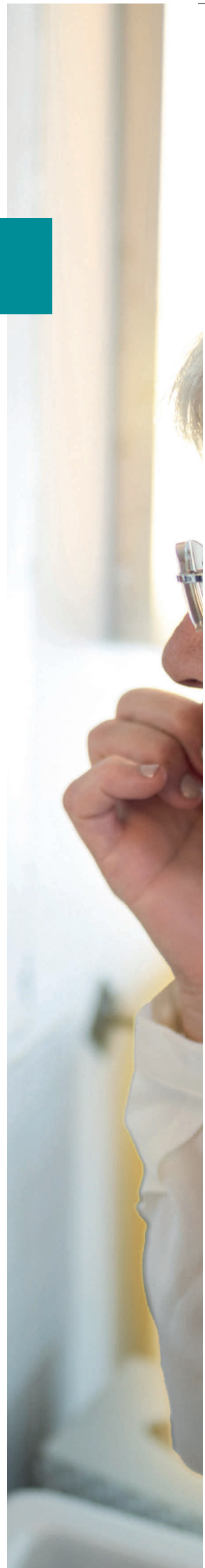
stems from public perception, media representation, and the acceptance of long-standing societal norms.

Interpersonal ageism

occurs in day-to-day interactions of two or more people based on assumptions we make about a person's age.

Self-directed ageism

occurs when we internalise the ageist stereotypes presented to us by society.



To assess older people's experience of ageism, COPNI hosted six roundtable events and conducted a survey of 333 older people living in Northern Ireland. The testimonies collected at roundtable events are provided throughout this report. Key insights from this survey are presented below:¹

49%

of older people have experienced ageism.

60%

agreed that older people were viewed as frail, vulnerable, or dependent.

65%

agreed that older people were viewed as a burden to society.

65%

agreed that as they have gotten older, they feel like they are taken less seriously.

¹ All percentages presented in relation to COPNI's survey are reflective of the total survey sample (n=333).



87%

believe that more government engagement is needed to tackle ageism and ageist attitudes.

95%

agree that older people have a lot to contribute to the workplace.

81%

believe that not enough government spending is committed to older people's issues.

63%

also believe that modern workplaces do not cater for their needs.

83%

feel that they play an active role in society.

45%

volunteer their time.

37%

have a caring responsibility.

36%

were involved in a sports group or exercise class.

16%

have chosen to remain in employment.

COPNI has produced a set of nine recommendations that, if implemented, could begin to address ageism in our society.

For everyone

Recommendation one – Use appropriate language when referring to older people

Speak to older people in the same way you would any other adult age group. When talking about older people, avoid clichés, derogatory terms, and negative language.

Recommendation two – Recognise the diverse experiences of older people

The lifestyles and backgrounds of older people are as diverse as any other age group, and it is important that this is recognised in our day-to-day interactions.

Recommendation three – Recognise the contribution that older people make to our society

It is important to challenge the assumption that older people are a burden or do not contribute to society. Older people have contributed to our society for decades and continue to do so. As with all citizens, older people deserve fair access to all public services.

For media organisations

Recommendation four – Present older people appropriately

Avoid clichés that are overly negative or positive. Do not present older people as an issue for younger people to address.

For employers

Recommendation five – Adopt age-inclusive policies and identify the factors that support older people in the workplace

As with other protected characteristics, diversity across age group should be a consideration in the recruitment process. Age-based discrimination in the workplace is illegal. Upskilling and promotion opportunities should therefore not be refused based on someone's age. To create an age-friendly workplace, be flexible with employees and ensure that the additional needs that emerge in later life such as health conditions and carer roles can be discussed with appropriately trained Human Resources and management teams.

For government

Recommendation six – Enact equality legislation to ensure older people are legally protected to the same level in Northern Ireland as other UK regions

Legislation should be developed to ensure older people are given the same legal safeguards in Northern Ireland as in other UK regions. Specifically, this should include measures that prevent discrimination against someone based on their age in the provision of goods, facilities, and services.

Recommendation seven – Recognise the importance of demographic change in the future *Programme for Government* by including an Outcome specific to older people

In light of our ageing population, the government should take measures to promote healthy ageing, considerate policy making, and appropriate public service design to meet the needs of an ageing population. Northern Ireland's future *Programme for Government* should have an Outcome specific to older people to support this ambition.





The Commissioner addressing participants at the tackling ageism event in Omagh.

Recommendation eight – Include older people's representatives in policy and service design

Older people and their representative groups should be included in the design and piloting of future public services in a meaningful way. This will help address instances of covert or unrecognised ageism that would otherwise go unchallenged.

Recommendation nine – Consider how age interacts with other protected characteristics in policymaking and outreach activities

The barriers associated with ageing can be exacerbated if a person belongs to a group that sits within an additional protected characteristic. It is important that the relationship between multiple protected characteristics is considered in outreach work, and in policy and service design.

Introduction

This section of the report sets out the role of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland and the objectives of this research project.

About the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland is an independent champion for older people that was established in 2011 through legislation introduced to strengthen the position of older people in Northern Ireland.

The Commissioner has statutory duties to safeguard and promote the interests of older people, as laid out in the *Commissioner for Older People Act (Northern Ireland) 2011*.² Under this Act, the Commissioner must also keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for older people and encourage best practice in the treatment of older people.

The Commissioner's office is a non-departmental public body. Both the Commissioner and his office are sponsored by the Department for Communities but are operationally independent.

Eddie Lynch is the second public appointment to the role of Commissioner and took up post in June 2016. In his role as Commissioner, Eddie is supported by a small team that facilitate his engagement with older people, addressing legal issues, signposting relevant services, and undertaking policy and advocacy work in the areas most important to older people.

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland is an authoritative and independent champion who safeguards and promotes the interests of older people.

² *Commissioner for Older People Act (Northern Ireland) 2011*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/1/contents>





Participants at Fermanagh tackling ageism event. (L-R) Norma MacMahon, Brian Flannagan, Sean Rooney, Anne Rooney, Maureen Hassard, Anna Marie Hassard

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland has six core duties:

1. The Commissioner must promote an awareness of matters relating to the interests of older persons and of the need to safeguard those interests.
2. The Commissioner must keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the interests of older persons.
3. The Commissioner must keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for older persons by relevant authorities.
4. The Commissioner must promote the provision of opportunities for, and the elimination of discrimination against, older people.
5. The Commissioner must encourage best practice in the treatment of older persons.
6. The Commissioner must promote positive attitudes towards older persons and encourage participation by older people in public life.



The purpose of this report

In Northern Ireland, life expectancy has risen by several decades in the last 100 years. There are now nearly one-third of a million people aged over 65 living in Northern Ireland according to the latest Census figures. This is reflective of a near 25% increase in people aged over 65 from 2011.^{3,4}

While people living longer is something to celebrate, many older people will notice a change in how other people interact with them as they age. This is a form of discrimination known as ageism that can have negative impacts on the quality of an older person's life. As such, Tackling Ageism, is the key objective of COPNI's 2022 – 2024 Corporate Plan.

“Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age”.

World Health Organisation⁵

It is important that the perspectives of older people in our society are championed. This will support government in its design of policy and public services to ensure that both address the needs of older people.

To ensure the perspectives of older people are shared, COPNI has engaged extensively with older people. This engagement included roundtable events with older people in each of Northern Ireland's six counties, a survey of 333 older people, and a wider desk review conducted by the Commissioner's Policy Advice and Research Unit.

The testimonies shared by older people highlight the pervasiveness of ageism across our society. This report focuses on how older people in Northern Ireland experience ageism, specifically assessing their experiences across three themes: ageism in society (institutional, interpersonal, and self-directed); ageism in a healthcare setting; and ageism in the workplace.

3 Census 2021 (2022) *Statistics press notice*, p.1 – 2. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-press-release.pdf>

4 Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2022) *Corporate Plan 2022 – 2024*, p.13. Available at: <https://www.copni.org/media/1863/copni-corporate-plan-2022-2024.pdf>

5 World Health Organisation (2021) *Ageing: Ageism*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism>

Overall, this report focuses on raising awareness about what ageism is and how this form of discrimination is experienced by older people. An in-depth review of wider policy areas is therefore not included in this study. COPNI does however recognise that ageism is a multidimensional form of discrimination that is present across a wide range of public and private services, for example in transport, housing, and the provision of goods, facilities, and services. A full overview of the methodology used, further research caveats and limitations, and details of the roundtable events are included at the end of this report.

(L-R) Lily Robinson and Renee McAllister COPNI Christmas photography competition winner 2021



Through this report, COPNI aims to:

- Present an overview of what ageism is and offer insights into how it impacts older people in Northern Ireland;
- Raise awareness of the unconscious ageist attitudes in our society;
- Promote awareness of the contributions that older people make in Northern Ireland to their families, communities, and society, through their work, volunteering, and civic leadership; and
- Change attitudes about older people and ageing.



The Commissioner presenting to participants at the tackling ageism event in Downpatrick

What is ageism?

Ageism is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO)⁶ as a multifaceted social phenomenon with several interrelated aspects. The different aspects of ageism as identified by the WHO are summarised below:

Ageism as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination:⁷

- **Stereotypes:** the beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of members of a social group that guide our behaviour and often govern what information we seek to remember. For ageism, stereotypes can relate to the physical or mental capacity of an individual, their social competencies, and their political and religious beliefs.
- **Prejudice:** the emotional reaction or feeling that is directed towards a person based on their perceived group membership.
- **Discrimination:** the actions, practices or policies that are applied to people on account of perceived or real membership of a specific group.

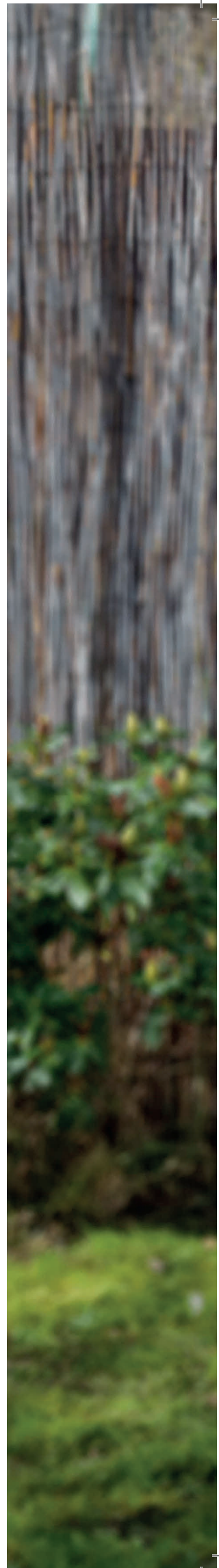
Institutional, interpersonal, and self-directed ageism:⁸

- **Institutional:** the laws, rules, social norms, policies, and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals based on their age. In many cases, institutional ageism goes unnoticed due to the long-standing nature of societal rules, norms, and practices.

6 World Health Organisation (2021) *Global Report on Ageism*. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/340208/9789240016866-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

7 World Health Organisation (2021) *Global Report on Ageism*. p.3. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/340208/9789240016866-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

8 World Health Organisation (2021) *Global Report on Ageism*. p.5 – 8. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/340208/9789240016866-eng.pdf?sequence=1>



What is ageism?



- **Interpersonal:** the way people interact in groups of two or more. Examples of interpersonal ageism can include disrespecting or patronising someone due to their age.
- **Self-directed:** this is ageism turned against oneself. This type of ageism usually occurs when people internalise the biases that they see in their surrounding culture. For example, when older people think they are too old to learn a new skill, or when older people accept a limiting policy or poorer service without challenge.

Explicit and implicit ageism:⁹

- **Explicit:** when ageist thoughts against others or oneself are conscious and intentional.
- **Implicit:** when ageist thoughts against others or oneself are unconscious and unintentional.

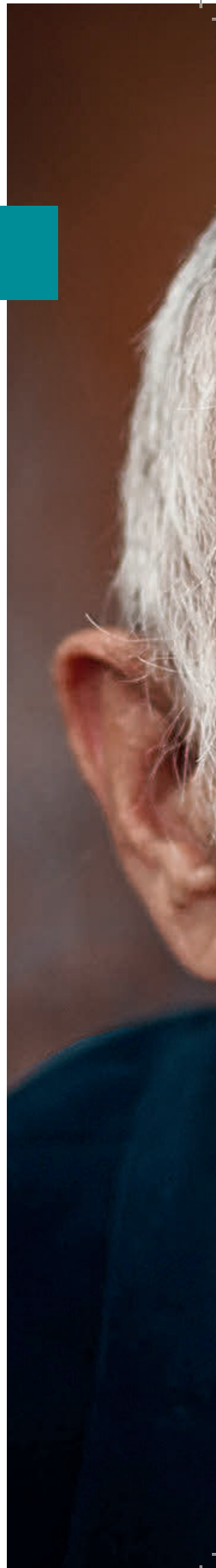
How ageism can interact with other protected characteristics

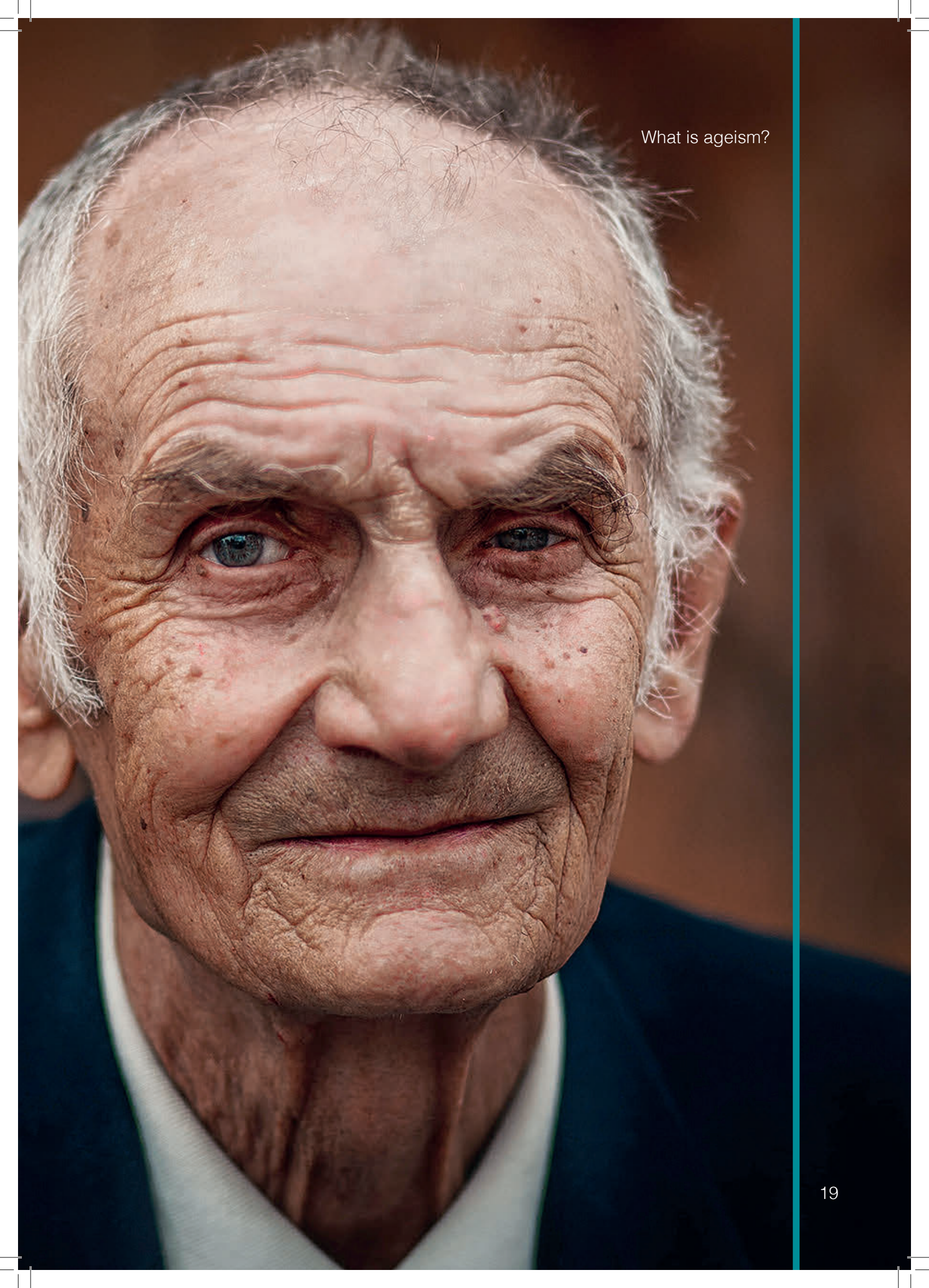
Under Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*¹⁰ public authorities are obligated to promote equality across nine protected characteristics, outlined in the figure below:

Protected characteristics		
Disability	Religious belief	Dependants
Gender	Racial group	Political opinion
Sexual orientation	Marital status	Age

9 World Health Organisation (2021) *Global Report on Ageism*. p.8. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/340208/9789240016866-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

10 *Northern Ireland Act 1998*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75>



A close-up portrait of an elderly man with a weathered face, showing deep wrinkles and blue eyes. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid, warm brown color.

What is ageism?



What is ageism?

Ageism can interact with other protected characteristics. Most obviously, ageism can be interlinked with disability and gender discrimination.

Where ageism and ableism (discrimination against people with a disability) occur, each form of discrimination is mutually reinforced. It can often mean that people are generalised into one homogenous group.

Gendered ageism (discrimination based on both age and gender) is more often experienced by women, with studies suggesting women experience more discrimination in healthcare and employment settings.¹¹ Testimonies collected at COPNI's roundtable events relating to gendered ageism included the following:

"There is this sense of fear around getting older, especially in women at the menopausal age, like it is this totally monstrous thing!"

"When men get older, they are described as things like 'silver fox' and 'distinguished.' Women don't seem to have that same positivity, about their appearance anyway."



The Commissioner presenting to older people at the tackling ageism event in Antrim

11 Ayalon and Tesch-Romer (eds.) (2018) *Contemporary Perspectives of Ageism*, p.35. Available at: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/27836/1002169.pdf?sequence=1#page=445>

The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland

In total, 60 per cent of respondents to the *World Values Survey*¹² think older people are not well respected.¹³ Findings from COPNI's survey of 333 older people are aligned to the *World Values Survey* and offer insight into the experiences of older people in Northern Ireland.

Almost half (49 per cent) of the older people that COPNI surveyed have experienced ageism.

The COPNI survey also suggests that the way older people view themselves differs from how they are viewed by society. Despite **83 per cent of older people stating that they play an active role in society:**

- 65 per cent feel that they are viewed as a burden;
- 65 per cent feel that as they have gotten older, they are taken less seriously; and
- 60 per cent feel that they are viewed as frail, vulnerable and dependent.

It is vital that steps are taken to address ageism in our society as it can have significant negative effects, such as a shorter lifespan, diminished mental and physical health, slower recovery from ill-health, cognitive decline, isolation, and reduced quality of life.¹⁴

To better understand how and why ageism occurs in Northern Ireland, subsequent sections will provide an overview of ageism from the perspective of:

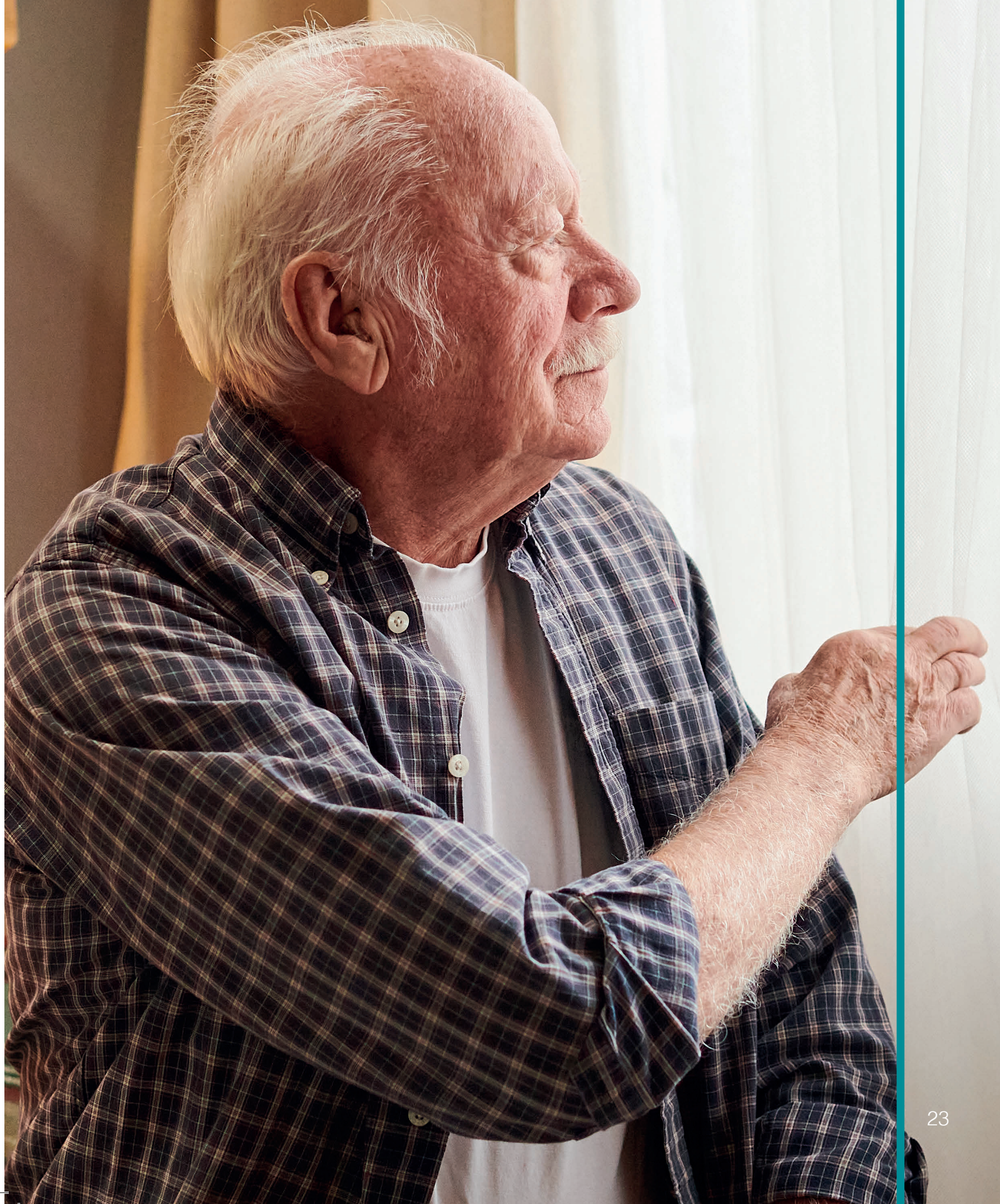
- **Society:** the attitudes towards older people in media, public institutions, and in our interpersonal interactions, and the impact that this can have on how older people view themselves;
- **Health:** an overview of the perceptions of ageism in a healthcare setting; and
- **Employment:** an overview of the perceptions of ageism in the workplace.

¹² World Health Organisation (2016) *Discrimination and negative attitudes about ageing are bad for your health*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-09-2016-discrimination-and-negative-attitudes-about-ageing-are-bad-for-your-health#:~:text=Fully%2060%25%20of%20respondents%20in,people%20across%20all%20age%20groups>.

¹³ The sample for this question includes c.80,000 people across 57 countries.

¹⁴ The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (2023) *Telling it like it is: Combatting Ageism*, p.9. Available at: https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AASNGOs_Telling-It-Like-It-Is_Combatting-Ageism.pdf

The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland





Ageism in society

This section outlines how perceptions in media, public institutions, and society more generally can result in ageist behaviour towards older people.

How media influences our perception of older people

Ageism often occurs because of the stereotypes that we hold as individuals and as a society. The role of the media and its portrayal of older people is central to the shaping and influencing of attitudes to older people and ageing.

The Centre for Ageing Better's *Ageism: What's the Harm* report¹⁵ offers statistics on the representation of older people in media. It suggests that only 25 per cent of all characters on television adverts are aged 50 or older, and that just five per cent of characters are over 70. The report also notes that women over 55 have reported feeling invisible, and that their image is often only used in media in connection with how to look younger.

It is important to consider the way older people are portrayed in the media as it often reinforces negative stereotypes. Images used in the media are commonly associated with frailty, helplessness, and technical incompetence. Furthermore, input from older people is not often requested in media discussions relating to older people's issues.¹⁶

The older people that COPNI engaged with at its roundtable events voiced a frustration with negative portrayals of older people in the media. Feedback collected as part of the roundtable events suggests that **older people feel that they are often presented as a burden within the media, and that this has a negative impact on how they view themselves, and how people interact with them.**

¹⁵ Centre for Ageing Better (2023) *Ageism: What's the harm?*, p.9 – 11. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/Ageism-harms.pdf>

¹⁶ The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (2023) *Telling it Like It Is; Combatting Ageism*, p. 22. Available at: https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AASNGOs_Telling-It-Like-It-Is_Combatting-Ageism.pdf



The Commissioner addressing participants at the tackling ageism event in Armagh.

"Media organisations are a big part of the problem in creating this 'burden' issue. It's a drip, drip effect."

"The media emphasises a lot about how much longer we are living today, but not in a positive way."

"Older people are always portrayed as a burden in the media, look at the recent bus pass news. All that was talked about was how much of a cost it was to society."

"The only way I feel like a burden is when I access healthcare. There is a narrative about older people taking up time and resources."

"We need to show good news stories of older people to counteract this type of activity."

Negative media coverage reinforces ageist attitudes in our society. This can have serious and far-reaching implications, as outlined in the case study below.

Case study one: the representation of older people during the Covid-19 pandemic

Dr Shir Shimoni¹⁷ completed a study in 2023 into the portrayal of older people in the UK during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her study assesses the relationship between the portrayal of older people in media, and how this impacts the views of wider society.

Reviewing content from four major UK newspapers, Shimoni was able to demonstrate that while older people had an increased risk of Covid-19 infection, mitigating the impact of the virus was portrayed as unmanageable. Shimoni suggests that framing the pandemic in this way had a negative impact on how older people were treated. She also noted that newspapers did not include the names, voices, or testimonies of older people in their reporting.

This narrative and reporting style had a negative impact on societal perceptions of older people during the pandemic. Shimoni suggests that, as a result, the deaths of older people were more readily accepted by the rest of the population.

¹⁷ Shimoni (2023) *The unprotectedables: A critical discourse analysis of older people's portrayal in UK newspaper coverage of Covid-19*. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10372518/>

Institutional ageism

Evidence submitted to parliament by the Centre for Ageing Better¹⁸ highlights how unlike other forms of discrimination, ageism is still socially acceptable and often goes unchallenged. The Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests that more people experience age discrimination than any other form of discrimination.¹⁹ Wider evidence indicates that ageism is a significant issue for UK institutions, and that it has become more apparent since the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰

Some of the examples of institutional ageism, identified in evidence submitted to parliament by the charity Age UK,²¹ include:

- An increasingly digital world and digital first policies that impact on the ability of older people to access public services, banking, and healthcare;
- A lack of available data about older people that can be used to support nuanced analysis, limiting the extent to which policy can be effectively developed to support the diverse needs among this demographic; and
- Limited engagement to overcome ageism in the workplace through the provision of retraining schemes, or additional support to older people who are carers.

In the Northern Ireland context, older people have reported feeling the impact of institutional ageism. Of the 333 older people that COPNI surveyed:

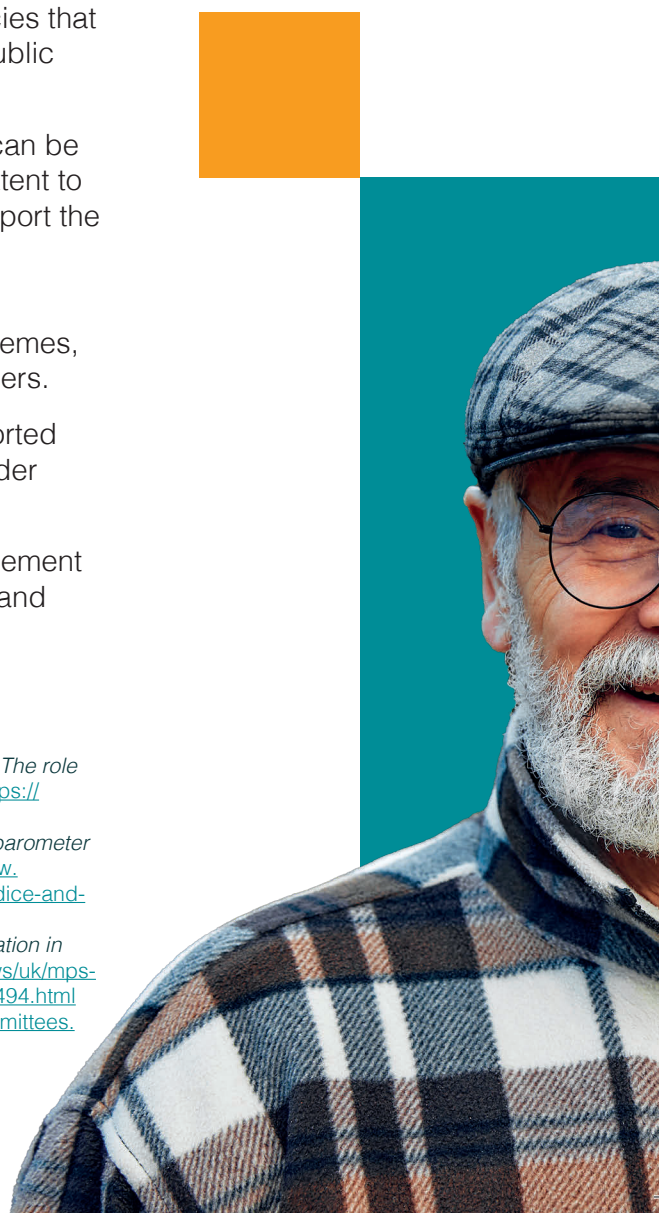
- 87 per cent believe that more government engagement is needed to tackle ageism and ageist attitudes; and
- 81 per cent believe that not enough government spending is committed to older people's issues.

18 Centre for Better Ageing (2021) *Centre for Ageing Better response to – The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government*. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22776/html/>

19 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) *Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain*, p.10. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/national-barometer-of-prejudice-and-discrimination-in-britain.pdf>

20 Independent (2024) *Ageism a widespread, accepted form of discrimination in UK society, MPs hear*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/mps-government-patrick-vallance-caroline-abrahams-caroline-nokes-b2476494.html>

21 Age UK (2023) *Written evidence from Age UK*. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/126201/pdf/>



The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland

Many instances of institutional ageism experienced by older people were highlighted at COPNI's roundtable events, several of which are outlined below.

Pressure from other people

"I feel that there is a culture of youth, and it is revered. There is a lack of acceptance of ageing, of life experience."

"The world has become so fast paced. People lack patience and are always in a rush. I feel bad if I hold up a queue at the train station because there is pressure to keep moving... It takes time for me to get out of my car and I was nearly knocked down by a driver who could not wait."

Exclusion caused by online only services

"Everything is digital and older people are being forgotten about. I'm not IT literate, and I, along with others, have no interest in using the internet, yet my bank expects me to... I can't even get a printout statement at my local branch anymore."

"I think clubs and groups need to remember their audience and how they advertise. I'm not online, I don't have email, so I don't know how they expect me to know about these things. You used to get leaflets through the door or adverts in the local paper."



Limited consideration of older people in public sector decision making

“Public seating has been removed around parks and stations in Derry to discourage anti-social behaviour. This directly affects older people who cannot stand for long periods of time, or who wish to sit for a moment.”

“Older people are forgotten about, but older people in rural areas are even more so. The government don't understand the importance of public transport to us, it's our links to the community and keeping socially active.”

“Public crossings do not always provide enough time to cross.”

When institutional ageism occurs in our public services, it is often as a result of an oversight in policy or service design. It can be subtle and long-standing, and often goes unchallenged.²²

Case study two: ageism within public institutions

The Commissioner's report, *A Different Crime: Offending Against Older People*²³, highlights how longstanding institutional systems impact the quality of services provided to older people. In this example, issues with data availability and gaps in guidance within government bodies mean that the experiences of older victims of crime are not monitored, and their additional needs not supported. As there are fewer older victims of crime in Northern Ireland than other age groups, this has not been treated as a significant issue. However, the Commissioner's report identified that older people consistently have poorer outcomes when dealing with the legal system.

Similarly, the Northern Ireland Executive's *Programme for Government*²⁴ illustrates how institutional attitudes to age and ageing can hinder or support society-wide interventions for older people. The *Programme for Government* from 2011 – 2015²⁵ recognised the need for age discrimination legislation in the provision of goods, facilities, and services, and included a specific commitment to enact this legislation. More than ten years later, this commitment has not been delivered upon and is an area in which the Commissioner still

22 Comincioli (2022) *Identifying and Addressing Implicit Ageism in the Co-Design of Services for Ageing People*. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/13/7667>

23 Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime: Offending Against Older People*. Available at: <https://www.copni.org/media/1899/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

24 This is the government's overall plan for how it will operate for its citizen

25 Northern Ireland Executive (2011) *Programme for Government 2011 – 2015*, p.10. Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/nigov/pfg-2011-2015-report.pdf>

campaigns.²⁶ Likewise, despite the clear demographic change in Northern Ireland and the increasing proportion of older people, the most recent draft *Programme for Government* does not include a first level Outcome specific to older people.²⁷ The Commissioner will be seeking a commitment from ministers to include a first level Outcome in the forthcoming *Programme for Government* in order to coordinate government activity and services for older people in the future.

COPNI is committed to working with government in Northern Ireland to identify and address issues of public service provision for older people. Ensuring that the views of older people are championed, and that the needs of older people are adequately addressed by our public services is now more urgent than ever. This was highlighted most recently during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the ongoing Covid-19 Inquiry. Evidence presented as part of the Covid-19 Inquiry highlighted examples of overt ageism against older people from senior government officials during the pandemic.

Case study three: institutional ageism during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the extent to which ageism permeates our society. Testimonies from the Covid-19 Inquiry offer powerful insight into the ageist attitudes of some people in leadership roles in the UK government.

Testimonies provided to the Inquiry suggest that former Prime Minister Boris Johnson was *“obsessed with older people accepting their fate and letting the young get on with life and [getting] the economy going”*.²⁸

Further testimonies highlight the extent to which ageism was present throughout government, *“[The] Chief whip says ‘I think we should let the old people get it and protect others’... [and the] PM says ‘a lot of backbenchers think that and I must say I agree with them’*.”²⁹

26 Independent (2022) *Northern Ireland age discrimination laws ‘must be urgently strengthened’*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/northern-ireland-belfast-rebecca-black-b2141499.html>

27 Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2021) *Programme for Government draft outcomes framework consultation: Response from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.copni.org/media/1742/march-2021-programme-for-government.pdf>

28 UK Covid-19 Inquiry (2023) *Extracts from Sir Patrick Vallance’s Notebooks*. Available at: https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/31180721/INQ000273901_0150-0164-0308.pdf

29 UK Covid-19 Inquiry (2023) *Extracts from Sir Patrick Vallance’s Notebooks*. Available at: https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/01121847/INQ000273901_0312.pdf

During the pandemic, the Commissioner played a significant role as a vocal independent advocate for the rights and interest of older people, directly challenging many of the ageist comments and attitudes that came to the fore in this period. COPNI is committed to engaging with the Covid-19 Inquiry as it develops to identify what went wrong during the pandemic, whether ageism played a part in the failings that occurred, and what can be done to prevent similar occurrences during future crises.

Interpersonal ageism

Interpersonal ageism occurs in everyday interactions when people change how they communicate with each other because of the other person's age. While not all forms of interpersonal ageism are ill intentioned, interacting with older people differently from other age groups can lead to marginalisation and can reinforce stereotypes. Examples of interpersonal ageism are outlined below.

Disrespecting or patronising a person based on their age, ignoring their point of view, or avoiding contact or interactions.

"I've heard people tutting or sighing when I'm maybe taking too long to get onto the bus or when I'm getting my bus pass out."

"The bank told me to 'get your son to help you with that' when I didn't understand the switch to online."

"I feel like I am not taken seriously as I age. I feel invisible. There exists a lack of curiosity, connection, or shared experiences... This leads to bad attitudes between generations."

Assuming someone is less capable because of their age.

"When I tell people I travel on long flights, they will say 'at your age?'"

"People don't mean to be patronising. I'm sure it's coming from a good place, but I know my own body and can make my own decisions on my ability based on how I feel."

Assuming someone does not contribute to society because of their age.

"People's attitudes changed towards me as I reached retirement age, like I no longer held value or was capable of contributing in a meaningful way."

"Societal attitudes make me feel incapable despite the fact I care for my grandchildren and spouse. I am active in my life and still contribute."

Self-directed ageism

Internal or self-directed ageism is the term used when someone directs ageist stereotypes inward. This can include, for example, when an older person does not think they have the capacity to learn new skills or to pick up a new hobby in later life, or when they view their life as less valuable than someone younger.

Recognition of internal ageism is important as older people who perceive their lives as less valuable are at a greater risk of depression and social isolation. Research suggests that these negative views can result in longer recovery times from ill-health, and a lifespan seven and a half years shorter than peers with a more positive outlook.³⁰

Feedback provided at COPNI's roundtable events highlight the ways in which internal ageism can lead to **self-doubt and limiting thoughts.**



The Commissioner speaking at the tackling ageism event in Derry/Londonderry

30 World Health Organisation (2016) *Discrimination and negative attitudes about ageing are bad for your health.* Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-09-2016-discrimination-and-negative-attitudes-about-ageing-are-bad-for-your-health>



"I suppose there are times when I say things like 'I shouldn't be driving at my age'... but I know I am capable and still want to."

"I am made to feel smaller because people dismiss what I can contribute."

"Societal attitudes make us feel pitied. People speak down to us, I get called wee man, doting or darling. There exists a dismissive attitude in general, a lack of respect for life experiences or empathy and understanding for individuality. This makes me feel small and incapable."

Ageism in healthcare

A commitment to combat ageism in the health and social care setting is included in the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland's Corporate Plan 2022 – 2024. COPNI is currently involved in several reviews relating to the law, practice and services of Northern Ireland's public healthcare services to assist in shaping public service design.

A review of public health and social care services is timely. Northern Ireland population estimates suggest that in 2022, almost one in every six people was over the age of 65. The proportion of people aged 65 or more has increased from 13 per cent in mid-1997 to 17 per cent in mid-2022. The proportion of people under 15 has decreased in the same period, from 25 per cent to 20 per cent of the total population.³¹ It is estimated that by 2027, there will be more people over 65 than there are people under 15.³² This will be the first time in its history that Northern Ireland will have more older people than children living here.

An ageing population has implications for how our health services operate. The most recent Census offers good insight into what an ageing population means for health services. As Northern Ireland's demographics change, it is more likely that a higher proportion of the population will experience a limiting long-term health condition or disability. Current figures suggest that the proportion of the total population living with a long-term health condition in Northern Ireland has increased nearly four per cent between 2011 and 2021.³³ Older people are also more likely than the general population to have one or more long-term health condition at a time.³⁴ To ensure older people are safe in our society and their health needs are met, it is vital that existing healthcare systems, and attitudes towards the healthcare of older people, evolve.

While a review of specific health and social care services is beyond the scope of this report, the perspectives below offer insight into the concerns of older people in Northern Ireland with regards to how they are treated when accessing healthcare services.

31 NISRA (2022) *2022 Mid-year Population Estimates for Northern Ireland – Summary*, p.2. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/MYE22-summary.pdf>

32 NISRA (2022) *2020-based Interim Population Projections for Northern Ireland*, p.8. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/NPP20-Bulletin.pdf>

33 Census 2021 (2022) *Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin Health, disability, and unpaid care*, p.20. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-2-statistical-bulletin-health-disability-and-unpaid-care.pdf>

34 NISRA (2021) *Health Problem or Disability (Long-term) by Age - 86 Categories by Health Conditions (Number) - 3 Categories*. Available at: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=DISABILITY_DVO&v=AGE_SYOA_85&v=HEALTH_CONDITION_NUM_TC2

For instance, many older people feel that their **health concerns are not properly investigated and that their concerns are put down to old age.**

"I have a chronic and debilitating health issue and it took [multiple] visits and [multiple] GPs to correctly diagnose me. Each one before the last dismissed my concerns because of expectations around my age."

"My sister visited the GP [with a health issue that impacted her appearance] ... and was told, 'at your age you will need to accept you just get these things'."

"Healthcare services discriminate against you as you age. There is a dismissive attitude – 'What do you expect at your age?' I have to really fight for healthcare services."

Older people also highlight systemic issues, such as long waiting lists, that **disproportionately impact their ability to live disability free.**

"I was on a waiting list... When my surgery was due to happen, I was told I was being moved to a new consultant who had a [longer] waiting list. I had to go to the media to raise my issue... It's degrading when you have to do that to get seen."

"When it's five years or more for a life changing surgery it forces older people down the route of private healthcare. The quality of life for older people who need hip or knee replacements dramatically suffers. Older people face the option of robbing their pension to have private surgery - which is between £10,000 - £20,000."

Aware of the pressures on the health service, some roundtable attendees also noted how **accessing public services makes them feel like a burden.**

"The only way I feel like a burden is when I access healthcare – there is a narrative about older people taking up time and resources."


The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland

One woman speaking on behalf of her mother noted the **reluctance of older people to inconvenience under pressure hospital staff.**

"I attended the hospital with my mother last week. When we were in the treatment room, I was requesting better care. They had not done a good job in treating her issues. She kept telling me to leave it, saying 'Let's just go, there are other people waiting'. She clearly feels like a burden."

The feedback that COPNI received on this issue highlights how ageism impacts service provision in healthcare, the quality of care that is expected by and for older people, and the extent to which older people feel they have the right to ask for support. COPNI will continue to work with Northern Ireland's health and social care services, articulating the needs of older people in this area.





Case study four: COPNI advocating for older people's rights in a healthcare setting

On 13 June 2018, the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland published *Home Truths – A Report on the Commissioner's Investigation into Dunmurry Manor Care Home*. The report outlined serious and systematic failings at the Dunmurry Manor care home, which at the time, was a 76-bed residential and nursing home specialising in dementia care.

Following a series of complaints from residents, alongside testimonies from care home staff, the Commissioner used his investigatory powers to examine issues at the home. As part of this investigation the Commissioner engaged with relevant authorities, the Department of Health, and Health and Social Care Trusts to explore allegations of poor care.

The Commissioner produced 61 key findings and a set of 59 recommendations with the ambition of improving care and bringing about significant change within the overall residential care system.

In the year following the publication of the Commissioner's report, COPNI analysed over 400 responses from the relevant authorities which included the four Health and Social Care Trusts, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, the Department of Health, and Dunmurry Manor's parent company Runwood Homes. This analysis was undertaken to assess engagement with, and progress against the Commissioner's recommendations for improvements within the system.

Significantly, following publication of the Commissioner's report, a separate investigation was launched by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, while the Department of Health appointed its own independent review team to examine poor practice at Dunmurry Manor care home.

COPNI continues to engage with the Department of Health to promote improvement in care home provision and has recently published a review of care home contracting procedures, *'Respecting Residents' Rights in Care Homes: A Review of the Regional Care Home Contract*.

Ageism in the workplace

Statistics on ageism in the workplace in Northern Ireland are limited. However, the UK's Centre for Ageing Better suggests that ageism is one of the most common forms of discrimination in an employment setting.³⁵ A Centre for Ageing Better survey suggests that almost half of respondents aged 50 - 69 believed recruitment practices disadvantaged older people.³⁶

A systematic review conducted by Dublin City University's Anti-Bullying Centre³⁷ suggests that ageism in an employment setting is linked with institutional issues. Evidence in the paper suggests that age is not often considered within the formal diversity and inclusion strategies of firms globally. It also highlights that instances of ageism in the workplace rarely result in legal action.

The Centre for Ageing Better highlights some of the cultural issues that can lead to ageism in the workplace, suggesting that managers believe it is less cost effective to invest in training for older employees, and that they are often aware of ageism in their organisation but unaware of how to address it.³⁸

In terms of addressing ageism in the workplace, a representative sample of people aged 50 and over in Britain suggests that less than half (40 per cent) of employees thought that their employer had a policy relating to the prevention of age discrimination, and of this sample, close to half (47 per cent) thought existing policies made no difference.³⁹

35 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) *Ageism: What's the harm?*, p.12. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/Ageism-harms.pdf>

36 Centre for Ageing Better (2021) *Good recruitment of older workers*, p.4. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-02/GROW-experiences-full-report.pdf>

37 Dublin City University (2022) *POWER Ageing: Addressing Ageism in the Workplace Report*, p. 14, 17. Available at: <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Power-Ageing-Report-2022.pdf>

38 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) *Ageism: What's the harm?* Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/Ageism-harms.pdf>

39 Centre for Ageing Better (2018) *Age discrimination in the workplace*, p.1. Available at: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/Age-friendly-employers-stats.pdf>

These insights were reflected in COPNI's survey of older people, with 63 per cent of respondents suggesting that modern workplaces do not cater for older people, with some people **feeling pressure to retire early to let younger people enter the job market.**

"In employment, there is this notion that once you reach a certain age you are blocking opportunities for younger ones. It's a feeling, it can be subtle but there is a pressure to go and make way for younger ones."

"I retired earlier than I would have liked. I was a teacher. I did feel bad, like it was time to step aside and let the younger ones have a chance."

Leaving the workforce can have implications for the financial prospects of an individual, their mental and physical health, and the way the individual views themselves. COPNI's survey suggests that 51 per cent of older people feel that attitudes changed noticeably towards them once they reached retirement age, and that this led to a **loss of identity.**

"Post retirement I feel like you lose your identity. When you're younger and still working, people ask you what you do as a conversation starter and are interested. When I retired, I became invisible... I have plenty to talk about if they asked!"

Despite negative attitudes to employment in older age, COPNI survey data highlights the often-overlooked value that older people add to society:

The prevalence of ageism in Northern Ireland

45%

volunteer in their community

37%

have a caring responsibility

36%

are involved in a sports group or exercise class

16%

continued to be employed

“Older people have a wealth of valuable knowledge, which is often expected to be used for free in volunteering roles, rather than in the workplace.”

As our population ages, it is vital that steps are taken to better adjust work practices for older people. This will help address economic issues such as staff shortages and will support older people as they live healthier lifestyles for longer.

Supporting older people in the workplace will become increasingly important as the population ages. A recent report conducted by Ulster University’s Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) highlights how in 2022, the number of sick days taken by employees in Northern Ireland was at its highest across an eight-year period.⁴⁰ The UUEPC links this to long-term health conditions and our growing and ageing population.⁴¹ Potential steps that an employer can take to avoid ageism in the workplace are highlighted in the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs report and include: ensuring that recruitment material is age neutral and non-discriminatory; providing training on unconscious bias to recruiters and decision makers; ensuring diversity among recruiters and decision makers; and using objective assessment criteria when recruiting and promoting for vacancies.⁴²

40 Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2023) *Sickness Absence: Lessons for Northern Ireland businesses and managers*. Available at: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/1588629/Sickness-Absence-Dec-23-Final.pdf

41 BBC (2024) *Sick days at work hit highest level in eight years in NI*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-67863535>

42 The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs (2023) *Telling it like it is; Combatting Ageism*, p.27. Available at: https://alone.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AASNGOs_Telling-It-Like-It-Is_Combatting-Ageism.pdf

How older people view themselves

Previous sections of this report have focused on the different ways that ageism can impact older people, offering insight into their experiences, and how they believe they are perceived by society. While this illuminates the nature and consequences of ageism, it is worth reflecting on the positive attitudes held by older people about themselves.

Despite older people often being viewed as frail or vulnerable, COPNI roundtable event attendees noted that while they were **aware of their own limits, they retained confidence in their own ability.**

"I know my own body and can make my own decisions on my ability based on how I feel".

"Younger people at times do view me as a burden, but I do not feel like this within myself. I am very independent; I value independence and life".

The **value of the life experiences possessed by older people** was also highlighted by event attendees.

"My children still ask for my advice and opinions. Wisdom comes from age."

"I feel I am treated well as I age, people come to me for advice and life experience, I feel valued."

"I'm still working, but I feel like I'm still respected due to my longevity with the company. I know the place inside out, unlike the younger people, and my input can be of real value. I know what has worked well in the past and what hasn't due to my experience."

Many COPNI roundtable event attendees were **positive about getting older**, despite the negative societal views associated with ageing.

"I feel full of life and energy. This is a second life; it is a matter of attitude and mindset".

"I am eager to share in the modern world, to connect and learn."

"Keeping active, sociable, and engaged with youth keeps you young – I am taking computer classes, I volunteer, and I'm taking part in drama classes."

"I am busier in 'retirement' than I was when I was working. I volunteer and I am in so many societies and groups. I like to feel needed and valued – so I really put myself out there."

The perspectives offered above are reflective of what it means to have a positive attitude to ageing. Yet as outlined throughout this report, ageism, among other factors, can limit the extent to which older people feel positive about ageing, and the extent to which they can age well. Recommendations arising from COPNI's engagement with older people across Northern Ireland are outlined overleaf and provide an outline of how our society can start to address ageism and support older people.



Recommendations

COPNI has produced a set of nine recommendations that, if implemented, could begin to address ageism in our society.

For everyone

[Recommendation one – Use appropriate language when referring to older people](#)

Speak to older people in the same way you would any other adult age group. When talking about older people, avoid clichés, derogatory terms, and negative language.

[Recommendation two – Recognise the diverse experiences of older people](#)

The lifestyles and backgrounds of older people are as diverse as any other age group, and it is important that this is recognised in our day-to-day interactions.

[Recommendation three – Recognise the contribution that older people make to our society](#)

It is important to challenge the assumption that older people are a burden or do not contribute to society. Older people have contributed to our society for decades and continue to do so. As with all citizens, older people deserve fair access to all public services.

For media organisations

[Recommendation four – Present older people appropriately](#)

Avoid clichés that are overly negative or positive. Do not present older people as an issue for younger people to address.

For employers

[Recommendation five – Adopt age-inclusive policies and identify the factors that support older people in the workplace](#)

As with other protected characteristics, diversity across age group should be a consideration in the recruitment process. Age-based discrimination in the workplace is illegal. Upskilling and promotion opportunities should therefore not be refused based on someone's age. To create an age-friendly workplace, be flexible with employees and ensure that the additional needs that emerge in later life such as health conditions and carer roles can be discussed with appropriately trained Human Resources and management teams.

For government

Recommendation six – Enact equality legislation to ensure older people are legally protected to the same level in Northern Ireland as other UK regions

Legislation should be developed to ensure older people are given the same legal safeguards in Northern Ireland as in other UK regions. Specifically, this should include measures that prevent discrimination against someone based on their age in the provision of goods, facilities, and services.

Recommendation seven – Recognise the importance of demographic change in the future *Programme for Government* by including an Outcome specific to older people

In light of our ageing population, the government should take measures to promote healthy ageing, considerate policy making, and appropriate public service design to meet the needs of an ageing population. Northern Ireland's future *Programme for Government* should have an Outcome specific to older people to support this ambition.

Recommendation eight – Include older people's representatives in policy and service design

Older people and their representative groups should be included in the design and piloting of future public services in a meaningful way. This will help address instances of covert or unrecognised ageism that would otherwise go unchallenged.

Recommendation nine – Consider how age interacts with other protected characteristics in policymaking and outreach activities

The barriers associated with ageing can be exacerbated if a person belongs to a group that sits within an additional protected characteristic. It is important that the relationship between multiple protected characteristics is considered in outreach work, and in policy and service design.

Methodology

The methodology used to inform this study is outlined below. Key stages included:

Desk review

The research team has drawn upon a range of literature relevant to ageism within this report. This includes academic and grey literature used to provide context in the current report, and to support the insights collected during COPNI's roundtable events.

Roundtable events

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland hosted six roundtable discussions with older people across Northern Ireland. The engagements involved lively group discussions between the Commissioner and older people to identify and hear first-hand the views and experiences of older people on the subject of ageism. These events took place in:

Antrim

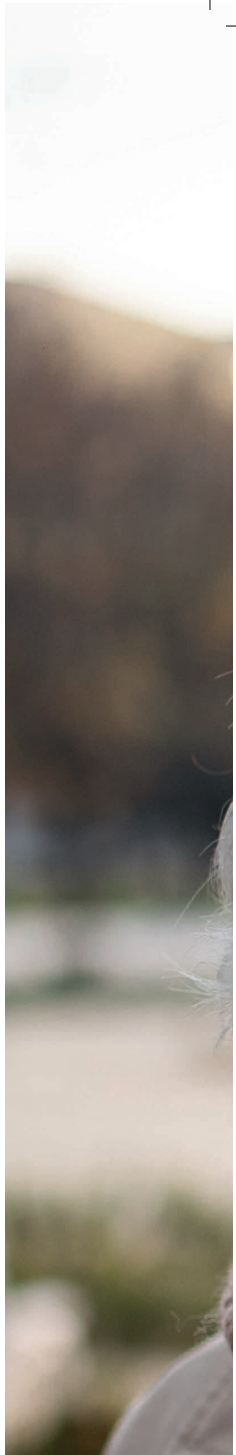
Monday 4 September 2023.

Downpatrick

Tuesday 12 September 2023.

Armagh

Wednesday 13 September 2023.



Omagh

Friday 15 September 2023.

Enniskillen

Tuesday 19 September 2023.

Derry/Londonderry

Thursday 21 September 2023.

Survey of older people

To expand on the views gathered during the roundtable engagements, a survey was also undertaken. In total, 333 older people provided feedback to COPNI's survey which explored attitudes to age and ageing in Northern Ireland across specific themes: healthcare, employment, access to goods and services, and interactions with other members of society.

Research caveats and limitations

Feedback collected during COPNI's roundtable events offers valuable insight into the experiences of older people across Northern Ireland. However, it is important to note that like all other age groups, older people may have vastly different lifestyles from their peers.

As such, the information collected at the roundtable events should not be viewed as representative of all older people, for example those attending the event are less likely to have a disability that limits their daily activities and are less likely to experience high levels of social isolation. The research team has therefore incorporated additional data sources and insight from other publications to ensure that the impact of ageism on older people with diverse lifestyles is reflected in this report.





Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

Equality House,
7-9 Shaftesbury Square,
Belfast, BT2 7DP

T: 028 9089 0892
E: info@copni.org

copni.org