

# Draft Budget Spending Proposals 2021-22

Response from the Commissioner for Older People for  
Northern Ireland

March 2021

I am writing in my role as Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI). My role, defined by the Commissioner for Older People (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 is to act as an independent voice and champion for older people. This is a statutory role, independent of government, providing powers and duties to safeguard and promote the interests of older people in Northern Ireland.

COPNI welcomes the opportunity to engage with the consultation on the development of Budget 2021-2022. As the population in Northern Ireland becomes older (by 2043, 24% of the population will be over 65 years) more creative, strategic public spending decisions are required to respond to the needs of older people. Critically, during the pandemic, older people are among those who have experienced the most negative impacts, the full consequences of which are not yet fully seen or understood.

Noting that the Draft Budget is a single-year budget in which 'everyday spending stands still', we recognise opportunities for transformational change to create an age-friendly society are limited. Nevertheless, in response to the consultation questions, I wish to highlight several areas which require urgent attention regarding the requirements of older people, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

## CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

### • *What service would you prioritise?*

Since the beginning of the pandemic, older people 'have experienced a higher risk of mortality and faced isolation due to restrictions on visits from family members, resulting in deterioration in mental and physical health'.<sup>1</sup> Public (and voluntary) service provision for older people across most sectors has been reduced, modified or halted entirely.

COPNI urges Government to fully consider the implications of its duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 'to promote equality of opportunity... between persons of a different age' in the context in which the pandemic has impacted on services for older people to a disproportionate extent. While the full impact upon older people in our society remains to be seen, our caseload along with early-stage data and research highlight the need for increased public service provision for older people to address the impact of the crisis. The disproportionate harm endured by this section of society during the pandemic requires a commensurate uplift in public expenditure to tackle the inequality experienced. The services requiring additional funding to support the needs of older people are:

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<sup>1</sup> *How Coronavirus has Affected Equality and Human Rights*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020, p.6

- Health and Social Care
- Bereavement Support
- Mental Health Services
- Community Transport
- Community and Voluntary Sector Services, including advice services.

Increased investment in these areas is urgently required to ensure further instances of health inequality do not recur<sup>2 3 4</sup>; and that older people, amongst those most isolated during the pandemic, are supported to re-integrate into community networks. Multi-year funding will be essential to develop the longer-term plans that are needed to address the additional pressures across the health care system and the need for increased pace in the reforms required to social care. Annual budgets are not suited to delivering the transformational change that is required to ensure that the current services meet the increasingly complex and evolving needs of an ageing population.

While the rationale for challenging health inequality is self-evident, supporting the process of re-connecting isolated older people to society post pandemic must not be regarded as an extravagance. Older people's ability to survive without certain services in their community over the past year should not be construed by policymakers as indicative of a lack of need (and therefore funding) for such services. Additionally, the corollary of the adverse impacts to living in care homes, could drive a major shift in the paradigm of communal living for older people.

As we emerge from this pandemic a vibrant voluntary and community sector that supports older people, accessible community transport infrastructure and in-person (as opposed to digital only) service provision will be vital to re-integrate older people into society.<sup>5</sup> As significant numbers of older people and disabled people do not access the internet, these groups are therefore potentially further excluded from accessing key services, whether that be public services or online shopping for essential goods. Additionally, any reductions in public transport services could further impact these groups. It will be vital that funding is in place to strengthen critical community supports to meet the likely greater needs of older people.

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<sup>2</sup> The UK Justice Secretary, Robert Buckland said the Government had to 'make a choice' in the early stages of the pandemic by protecting the NHS over care homes and that, the decision to do so was 'absolutely essential' (*Coronavirus: Focus was on NHS over care homes early in outbreak, says minister*, Sky News, 20 May 2020, available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-nhs-prioritised-over-social-care-during-early-stages-of-outbreak-minister-says-11991378> ).

<sup>3</sup> A public body within the Department of Health NI, stated that 'there was no expectation' patients would be tested for Covid-19 when moving from hospitals to care homes – in effect, permitting the movement of untested people from hospitals to care homes, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52762820>

<sup>4</sup> For an examination of the UK Government's policies pertaining to people in care homes see: *As if Expendable, The UK Government's Failure To Protect Older People In Care Homes During The Covid-19 Pandemic*, Amnesty International, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *How Coronavirus has Affected Equality and Human Rights*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020, p.9.

- ***Are there services we should stop or reduce?***

Not applicable

- ***Are there ways of raising revenue?***

Not applicable

- ***How can we reduce demand for services?***

The rationale underpinning this question is unclear; it seems unlikely that a wholesale reduction 'in demand for services' is an ambition of this draft budget or the Northern Ireland Executive. A society which meets the needs of its members as efficiently, effectively, and equitably as possible given a finite budget, would likely result in service provision defined by rationalism, flexibility and innovation, rather than a goal of reduced demand for services.

COPNI holds that the former approach would result in recognition of the full extent of the needs of older people and commensurate public expenditure to address demand. Ultimately, good quality, timely public service provision can serve to reduce overall expenditure (as opposed to 'demand') by identifying priorities well in advance and allowing for meaningful stakeholder involvement.<sup>6</sup> The Government's emphasis must be on the flexibility of service provision rather than reducing demand for services. The context in which services are delivered has changed, the profile of those needing services has changed and consequently, so must service provision adapt. An aspect of this changing context is the demographic profile of Northern Ireland which has an increasingly older population, meaning a need for more health and social care community-based support, more carers, and more appropriate housing.

- ***How do we balance public sector pay against other priorities?***

Not applicable

## **CONCLUSION**

COPNI has a growing caseload addressing the increasing pressures in our society in health and social care, housing, and transport provision. Over the past year, among others, HSC, housing, and transport officials engaged with the Commissioner's office have observed that given the financial constraints on them, their services are unable to fully meet the needs of older people.

Effective public spending, that meets the needs of older people in society, requires medium- and long-term planning, with a framework of ambitious targets. The proposed budget, by largely maintaining the spending status quo, will reduce services for an increasing, older population at a time when they are needed most.

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<sup>6</sup> see 2018-based Population Projections for Northern Ireland, NISRA, 2019.

Therefore, creative, realistic and proportionate budget allocation is required that plans for a rapidly changing society, strengthens existing services, and develops innovative ways to meet the needs of older people. In the wake of this pandemic, it is more apparent than ever that if we choose to build a society which values quality of life then the budget must deliver the right services for Northern Ireland's ageing population.

If you would like to discuss the details of my submission further, please contact my Policy Team via:

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Yours sincerely



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