

# **Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020**

**Response from the  
Commissioner for Older People  
for Northern Ireland**

**January 2018**

## Role of the Commissioner

The Office of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland is an independent public body established under the Commissioner for Older People Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

The Commissioner has an extensive range of general powers and duties which provide the statutory remit for the exercise of the functions of the office. In addition the Commissioner may provide advice or information on any matter concerning the interests of older people. The wide ranging legal powers and duties include amongst others:

- To promote and safeguard the interests of older people (defined as being those aged over 60 years and in exceptional cases, those aged over 50 years);
- To keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice relating to the interests of older people;
- To keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for older persons by relevant authorities (defined as being local councils and organisations including health and social care trusts, education boards and private and public residential care homes);
- To promote the provision of opportunities for and the elimination of discrimination against older persons;
- To review and where appropriate, investigate advocacy, complaint, inspection and whistle-blowing arrangements of relevant authorities;
- To assist with complaints to and against relevant authorities;
- The power to bring, intervene in or assist in legal proceedings in respect of relevant authorities;
- To issue guidance and make representations about any matter concerning the interests of older people.

The Commissioner's powers and duties are underpinned by the United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1991) which include Independence, Participation, Care, Self-fulfilment and Dignity.

## Context

The Commissioner appreciates that the Executive not reforming has put the Department of Finance (DoF) and the wider Civil Service in a difficult position as they manage the delivery of services and medium term budgetary pressures without definitive knowledge of a date the Executive may take office. The Commissioner welcomes the opportunity to respond to these Budget proposals, and that the process has not been carried out entirely internally within the Departments.

Although the Commissioner remains unhappy with the level of focus on older people, he agrees with the proposition in the document that focus should be maintained on the objectives of the PfG through the ongoing delivery of services.

Of the three broad scenarios that the document presents, Scenario One is described as a broad continuation with the approach of the previous Executive. This approach would conflict with the statement in the document that ‘the budgetary pressures across the public sector, and particularly in health and education, far outweigh the budget available and continuing with the same pattern of spend as in previous years is simply not sustainable,’ and ‘in the longer term, public services can be transformed to improve outcomes while living within resources. Some of these actions will initially involve additional expenditure.’ Continuing with the approach of the previous Executive, with its origins in 2016-2017, would mean that no central finance would be provided for new actions and interventions. This would not facilitate work on improving and reforming public services. This would create a conflict with one of the central objectives of the Programme for Government, which was written to *“inform the development of the Executive’s Budget over the course of this mandate and provide a mechanism for ensuring our limited funds are best directed to where they can contribute most.”*<sup>1</sup>

Effectively ‘freezing’ the distribution of budgets would not allow the work of Government to evolve and restrict the implementation of the PfG and the AAS (in which around a third of programmes still require financing to be secured).

The text of the PfG talks of financial resources influencing the pace at which delivery can occur, but the strategic direction being constant. The inability to depart

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, ‘Programme for Government Consultation Document’, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-consultation-document.PDF>

from the previous years approach is a severe constriction upon delivering the objectives of the PfG. The Commissioner is also concerned that around a third of the programmes in the AAS were marked as needing finance to still be secured, and Government needs flexibility to implement these programmes.

Therefore a mix of Scenarios Two and Three, which raise reducing or stopping support for some existing services and policies, or asking citizens to pay some more for the services they receive, seems more appropriate, although this must be done in a way that does not take services to crisis point, or inhibit the ability of older people to access services and contribute to society. Doing this would be completely counter productive, with the numbers of older people increasing by nearly 5% over the next two years.<sup>2</sup> Doing so would be a ‘false economy’, and given the nature of demographic change is an approach that will lead to larger issues and challenges in future budget cycles post-2020. The Commissioner is concerned that some of the measures proposed in this document fall into this category:

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<sup>2</sup> NISRA, ‘2016-based Population Projections for Northern Ireland’,  
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2016-based-population-projections-northern-ireland>

## Proposed Saving Measures

### Increased Housing Executive Rents

The Commissioner is concerned that increasing Housing Executive rents will adversely affect older people, in an environment where the need for more appropriate housing is a key challenge for older people.<sup>3</sup> There remain substantial numbers of older people living in Housing Executive premises (11.8% of total inhabitants are 65 or over), and many numbers of these will be 'cash poor', and will be adversely affected by these rises.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, 13% of low income pensioners lived in Northern Ireland Housing Executive or housing association accommodation.<sup>5</sup>

Average weekly income of pensioners is around 5% below the UK average.<sup>6</sup> Households headed by older people are also more likely to be living in fuel poverty than other households, further tightening their personal budgets. Fuel poverty was found to be 66.3% for households with a Household Reference Person of 75 and over, 52% for 60 to 74's, comparing to 36% for 17-59's. 60.8% of older households were in fuel poverty, compared to 36.8% of adult households and 31.9% of households with children.<sup>7</sup>

The Commissioner notes that there are commitments in the PfG to support under represented groups like older people into home ownership or other appropriate housing and in the AAS to start an Accessible Housing Register for Social Housing. The PfG says that older people 'should share in the progress to each of the outcomes', and it is worrying that programmes are being reduced, or charges increased in areas that affect older people without programmes that would potentially improve these services being fully implemented.

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<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, 'Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2021', <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/active-ageing-strategy.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Dr Alison Wallace, 'Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland', <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/HousingInequalities-FullReport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> OFMDFM, 'A Profile of Older People in Northern Ireland – 2013 Update', <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/a-profile-of-older-people-2013-update.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NISRA, 'Pensioners Incomes Series', [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/530950/pensioners-incomes-series-2014-15-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/530950/pensioners-incomes-series-2014-15-report.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> OFMDFM, 'A Profile of Older People in Northern Ireland – 2014 Update', <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/a-profile-of-older-people-2014-update.pdf>

## Concessionary Fares

The document raises the prospect of the Senior Smart Pass being denied to new applicants who are 60-64, or potentially taken away from this age group altogether. This would represent a future reduction to a programme that had benefited many older people so far.

COPNI believe concessionary fares have had a beneficial effect for older people through their usage of public transport, and this is something which is set out in Government's own draft Accessible Transport Strategy 2025.<sup>8</sup> The numbers of journeys made on public transport by older people and people with a disability were less than 8.5 million when concessionary fares were introduced. By 2014/2015 this had increased to 13 million journeys.<sup>9</sup> By 2016-2017, 312,593 SmartPasses were held by older people, with around 79% uptake of the SmartPasses.<sup>10</sup> Uptake and usage of SmartPasses has consistently gone up in the past five years – with usage increasing to 216,406 people by 2016/2017.<sup>11</sup> Evidence does not suggest they are being widely used for commuting purposes, but for health appointments and social activities.<sup>12</sup> The Commissioner believes the Senior Smart Pass has been a driver for increased public transport usage by older people, and is returning high usage figures, thereby enabling higher numbers of older people to contribute to society and the economy in many ways.

The Commissioner is particularly worried that the loss of access to the Senior Smart Pass may hurt older people more in rural areas, who already have less access to services and to employment opportunities.<sup>13</sup> There is a disparity between the numbers of older people in urban (53%) and rural (30%) areas using public transport.<sup>14</sup> This proposed restriction to the SmartPass programme will affect those in rural areas as much as urban areas. Given that the key aim outlined in the Programme for Government to have a transport system that is *"inclusive and*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/drd/accessible-transport-strategy-consultation-2025.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> NIAO, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, 'DRD: The Effectiveness of Public Transport in Northern Ireland', [http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/public\\_transport\\_report\\_210415.pdf](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/public_transport_report_210415.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Department for Regional Development, 'Accessible Transport Strategy 2025: Consultation Document', <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-northern-ireland-transport-statistics-2016-17>

<sup>11</sup> Department for Infrastructure, 'Northern Ireland Transport Statistics 2016-2017', [https://www.infrastructure-](https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/NI%20Transport%20Statistics%20Annual%202016-2017.pdf)

[ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/NI%20Transport%20Statistics%20Annual%202016-2017.pdf](https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/NI%20Transport%20Statistics%20Annual%202016-2017.pdf)  
<sup>12</sup> Des McKibbin, 'Is the Continued Provision of Free Travel for 60-64 Year Olds Sustainable', RAISE Research Matters, <http://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2017/12/08/is-the-continued-provision-of-free-travel-for-60-64-year-olds-sustainable/>

<sup>13</sup> DRD, 'Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Users' Survey'.

<sup>14</sup> DRD, 'Attitudes of Disabled and Older People to Public Transport, November 2014-January 2015', [https://www.drdni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/Attitudes%20of%20Disabled%20and%20Older%20People%20to%20Public%20Transport%2C%20November%202014%20%E2%80%93%20January%202015.p](https://www.drdni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/Attitudes%20of%20Disabled%20and%20Older%20People%20to%20Public%20Transport%2C%20November%202014%20%E2%80%93%20January%202015.pdf)  
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accessible” to all<sup>15</sup>, the Commissioner believes that Government should be exploring ways to make more older people who are eligible aware of the benefits of the SmartPass, not by beginning to roll back the scale of the project.

In the AAS, the SmartPass is listed as one of the measures that have brought improvements to the quality of life of older people, before it is outlined that the Strategy will “*undertake a more systemic review of the wide range of measures directed to improve the lives of older people.*”<sup>16</sup> The Commissioner is concerned that this wide ranging review is not happening, and instead individual measures are being restricted on an ad hoc basis without due assessment of what the needs of older people are.

### **Prescription Charges**

The Commissioner notes that the “*amount of income cited from changing the system would depend on the charging model adopted and any exemptions from payment that might apply.*” In England, although there is a system of prescription charges, there is an exemption from the charge from all those who are 60 or over,<sup>17</sup> and the Commissioner would recommend that this would apply, to any new system that is introduced here. As the biggest users of healthcare – older people would be hardest hit by any fee.

### **Health Trust Car Parking Charges**

The Commissioner is concerned that the prospect of widening car parking charges on larger health and social care sites could affect older people travelling to appointments, and also the ability of families to stay with older people who are in hospital for longer periods. More information is needed on the scale and applicability of the charging to assess what impact it would have upon older people, and their relatives who may be visiting them in hospital.

### **Broadening of Community Care Services**

The Commissioner notes that this section of the document raises the possibility for charging for domiciliary care and day care (and the associated transport costs), and an increase in the charge levied by Trusts for community meals could be

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<sup>15</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, ‘Programme for Government Consultation Document’, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-consultation-document.PDF>

<sup>16</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, ‘Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2021’, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/active-ageing-strategy.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> NHS Digital, ‘Prescriptions Dispensed in the Community, Statistics for England 2005-2015’, <https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB20664>

implemented. The Commissioner is concerned that indiscriminate implementation of this proposed measure will make life even more difficult for the many older people struggling with their finances. As the consultation document itself says, older people have relatively lower incomes (and in many cases less ability to raise their income). Single Pensioners in Northern Ireland had the lowest level of gross income across UK regions, while Pensioner couples had the second lowest gross income, with the highest level of benefit income.<sup>18</sup> Average weekly income of pensioners is around 5% below the UK average.<sup>19</sup> 16% of pensioners in Northern Ireland are in relative poverty After Housing Costs (AHC), compared to 14% as the UK average.<sup>20</sup> Before Housing Costs 20% of pensioners were in poverty in 2014/2015, 4% higher than the UK average.<sup>21 22</sup>

Although the consultation claims that the 5% or 10% charge has been worked out with reference to the fact that older people have relatively lower incomes, those who have already been paying for care relating to low or moderate care needs, those with little savings or no other means to pay this new charge.

The Commissioner has long pointed out the need for establishing a regional approach to domiciliary care, with a regional tariff and appropriate rates of pay and qualifications for workers, ultimately underpinned by a 'fair rate' for provision of this care. To have a standardised charge brought in *without* concurrent improvements to services appears to unduly impact older people.

The Commissioner also notes that there is not enough information in this document to determine whether the proposal for charging is based on the principle outlined in 'Power to People' that "*charging arrangements should be based in the principle that where a person can afford to contribute to the cost of a service they should do so,*"<sup>23</sup> and given there appears to be no assessment of income or programme mentioned to establish a 'true rate for care', raising the prospect of a 5% or 10% charge is arbitrary, and is one the Commissioner would like to see be much more rigorously balanced against the cost of providing the care and what older people can afford.

The proposals to charge more for community meal services will also affect older people substantially. 93% of the 1,846 people receiving such services are 65 and

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<sup>18</sup> NISRA, Pensioners Income Series Bulletin, Northern Ireland 2013/2014.

<sup>19</sup> DWP, 'Pensioners Income Series',

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/530950/pensioners-incomes-series-2014-15-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/530950/pensioners-incomes-series-2014-15-report.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> OFMDFM, 'A Profile of Older People in Northern Ireland – Annual Update (2015)',

<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/a-profile-of-older-people-in-ni-annual-update-2015.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Department of the Communities, 'Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin 2014-2015',

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-poverty-bulletin-201415-released>

<sup>22</sup> Fergal McGuinness, 'Poverty in the UK: Statistics',

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Des Kelly and John Kennedy, 'Power to People', [https://www.health-](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/power-to-people-full-report.PDF)

[ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/power-to-people-full-report.PDF](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/power-to-people-full-report.PDF)

over, with the least capacity to increase income. This service has already ceased in the Southern Trust and there have been year on year declines on those receiving the services, which the Commissioner is concerned that further increases in charges will perpetuate. <sup>24</sup>

## **Non Emergency Patient Transport**

Elsewhere in this document, other potential restrictions to transport services are raised, which would mean that older people will face more challenges travelling to and between hospitals anyway. This document states the focus is on making sure that the service is not incorrectly used by patients who could use alternative services for their journey. The Commissioner believes Government must recognise that there are substantial numbers of older people in rural areas who may not have any alternative forms of transport. This is another proposal where it is made more difficult to comment by the lack of detail provided – there is little definition of what the new criteria will actually be. The Commissioner is worried by the fact that the existing guidance already seems quite clear – *“there must be a medical need for transport. This reason could be that you are immobile and unable to utilise public transport, or as a result of your treatment. This medical necessity will need to be confirmed by a physician stating that your condition is so severe that you are unfit to travel by other means.”* <sup>25</sup> Tightening already seemingly clear criteria could impact those older people who have no alternatives. The Programme for Government Delivery Plans for Indicators 23,25 and 47 actually outline plans to expand and integrate rural and disabled services with Health and Education passenger transport to increase opportunities for rural communities. Instead, it is proposed that these opportunities be actually reduced.

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<sup>24</sup> NISRA, ‘Statistics on Community Care for Adults in Northern Ireland 2016-2017’, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/cc-adults-ni-16-17.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, ‘Patient Transport Service’, <http://www.nias.hscni.net/our-services/patient-transport-service/>

## Departmental Budget Cuts

The document outlines potential restrictions to Budgets, particularly in the areas of Health and Transport.

In discussing Health policy, it is stated that securing additional financing through in year monitoring, as happened this financial year, is 'far from ideal in the planning and management of services.' If additional financing through in year monitoring is not available, then service reductions would be necessary across health and social care. This is of great concern when the numbers of older users already indicate the need for careful planning.

From the already high base of users, population projections show that from there being 412,203 older people in Northern Ireland aged 60 or over now, there will be 431,233 in just two years time.<sup>26</sup> This increase in the older population, nearly 5%, shows the need for more structured planning in Health and Social Care that takes into account the age group that are the largest numbers of users of the system.<sup>27</sup> The Commissioner believes this situation (along with reforms to HSC not being progressed) would disproportionately affect older people, who have not benefited from the continual focus of the system on acute care, which has traditionally taken the majority of resources.<sup>28</sup>

It is encouraging that this documents states that proposals have been developed in line with the priorities set out in *Delivering Together*, but it is important they are progressed quickly. The PfG talks of "better understanding the HSC needs of our population so that we invest in prevention and early intervention to help people stay as well as possible."<sup>29</sup> More support for community based care services is needed now.

The Budget situation that is outlined in this document regarding the Department for Infrastructure is also a concern to the Commissioner. The Commissioner notes that Translink has maintained the public transport network by sustaining annual losses of around £13 million from their reserves but there is limited capacity for this to continue. The fact that scenarios one and three involve reductions to the budget, and

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<sup>26</sup> NISRA, '2016-based Population Projections for Northern Ireland',  
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2016-based-population-projections-northern-ireland>

<sup>27</sup> NISRA, 'Statistics on Community Care for Adults in Northern Ireland 2016-2017', <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/cc-adults-ni-16-17.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> The King's Fund, 'Integrated Care in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales: Lessons for England',  
[http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field\\_publication\\_file/integrated-care-in-northern-ireland-scotland-and-wales-kingsfund-jul13.pdf](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/integrated-care-in-northern-ireland-scotland-and-wales-kingsfund-jul13.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, 'Programme for Government: Consultation Document',  
<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-consultation-document.PDF>

the consultation says that “*reductions to service levels would be inevitable and severe,*” with the public transport network significantly reduced, is of concern to the Commissioner.

Restrictions of these services would be particularly damaging to older people and restrict their access to important services. The instances of people who have difficulty with travel due to physical disability or a long standing health problem increase with age. The Northern Ireland Travel Survey showed 38% of respondents aged 60 or over have difficulty with travel due to these factors.<sup>30</sup> Those aged 60 or over make up the largest proportion of those who have difficulty with travel due to a physical disability or a long standing health problem - 36%. This is higher than other age groups and increases among the people aged 70 or over – 46% of these people reported these mobility difficulties. Having a mobility difficulty reduces an older person’s number of journeys a year by around 300.<sup>31</sup>

There are around 50,000 rural households consisting of older people. 29% of these households where an older person is the Primary Reference Person are situated in rural areas.<sup>32</sup> There is a disparity between the numbers of older people in urban (53%) and rural (30%) areas using public transport.<sup>33</sup>

The Commissioner is also concerned about what is framed in scenario one and three as a fundamental change to the delivery of Rural and Community Transport, that in 2019-2020 would involve stopping grant financing to at least one of the service providers, that could put into question the viability of continuing these services. The Commissioner is particularly concerned that this will follow on from licencing changes that may partially inhibit the delivery of these services. Community Transport groups have contributed substantial amounts of assistance to older people. 70% of Community Transport organisations have said they carry older people as part of their care activities.<sup>34</sup> The Rural Community Transport Partnerships, in the areas of most need, are estimated to have 1257 volunteers, provided 608,251 trips to users and take 444,094 bookings a year.<sup>35</sup> These services not continuing would affect many older people.

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<sup>30</sup> DRD, ‘Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Users’ Survey’,  
<https://www.drdni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/ni-concessionary-fares-users-survey-may-2011.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Conor Breen, ‘Public and Community Transport for Older People in Rural People in Rural Ireland – North and South’, <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/cardi-research-public-and-community-transport-for-older-people-in-rural-ireland.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.ark.ac.uk/services/olderpeople1.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> DRD, ‘Attitudes of Disabled and Older People to Public Transport, November 2014-January 2015’,  
<https://www.drdni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/Attitudes%20of%20Disabled%20and%20Older%20People%20to%20Public%20Transport%2C%20November%202014%20%E2%80%93%20January%202015.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Des McKibbin, ‘Community Transport in Northern Ireland’,  
[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2012/regional\\_dev/8112.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2012/regional_dev/8112.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Gauge NI/ CTNNI, ‘The Benefits of Rural Community Transport: Social Return on Investment Report’,  
<http://www.gaugeni.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/RCTP-SROI-Report.pdf>

## Conclusion

The Commissioner recognises the DoF is in a difficult situation, with the present uncertainty in relation to the Executive. However the Commissioner is concerned that some of the measures proposed cause undue impacts to older people while not furthering reforms of Government services, nor the aims of the Programme for Government or the Active Ageing Strategy. The Commissioner would therefore appeal to the Government to reconsider these changes.