

A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland Consultation Document & Draft Bill

Ballymena Borough Council Draft Response

Ballymena Borough Council recognises the important and significant contribution that older people make to society and welcomes the impending legislation that will enable the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People during 2011.

Whilst we acknowledge the detailed consultation that has taken place with key representatives of the Age sector including Age Concern, Help the Aged and the Age Sector Platform to shape this document we share their concerns that the proposed duties and powers include very low level responsibilities which we believe will make little difference to addressing some of the real day to day issues of fuel poverty, benefit entitlement, loneliness, health care provision, and personal safety affecting our older population.

The use of language to describe the proposed duties of the Commissioner such as "keep under review", "take reasonable steps" and also the language used to describe the powers of the Commissioner such as "may produce research", "may compile and publish information" is not the level of responsibility expected of a very powerful influential figure representing the interests of older people.

Ballymena Borough Council therefore requests Executive commitment to reviewing the duties and powers of the Commissioner to ensure that legislation enables the appointment of a **POWERFUL** and **STRONG** independent voice creating real outcomes for older people. Furthermore we note the intention to develop Memoranda of Understanding with other regulatory bodies however we would suggest that collaborative working is formalised as a statutory requirement in the draft bill to ensure that organisations providing services for and supporting older people can be held to account by the Commissioner for Older People.

Council acknowledges the detailed role of the Commissioner in dealing with complaints and formal investigations, which are similar to the powers of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. We note however the intention not to represent Older People who pay for their care in nursing/residential homes and believe that the ability to pay should not be used as a discriminatory factor. The Commissioner we believe should be available to **all** Older People irrespective of their personal financial position.

In light of the importance of providing a high quality health care system for all older people, Ballymena Borough Council suggests that the Commissioners powers be expanded to cover appropriate private or voluntary organisations in addition to Public sector organisations thus ensuring that the interests and possible concerns raised by older people paying fees in private or voluntary sector nursing homes are covered by the Commissioners formal and specific powers.

Council supports Older Peoples involvement in the recruitment process and would suggest the adoption of a similar process as to that used to appoint the Children's Commissioner where representatives from a Young People's Advisory Forum were involved throughout the process including making the final recommendation to the Secretary of State.

Ballymena Borough Council believes that the appointment of an Older Peoples Commissioner will only be successful if backed by sound legislation with real powers to Represent, Challenge, Influence and Enforce, thus ensuring that Older People in our community achieve what they deserve – real meaningful outcomes to the issues that are of utmost importance to them.