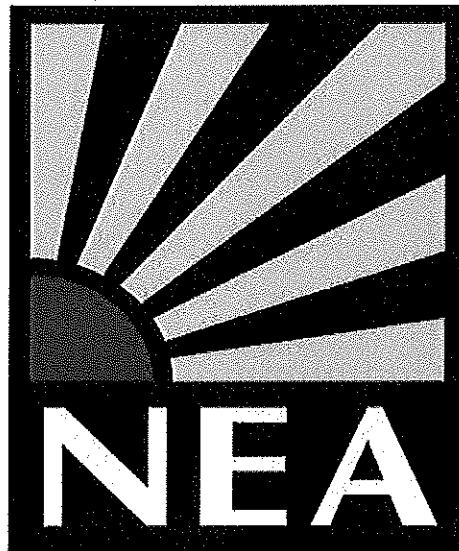




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**An Older People's Commissioner for Northern  
Ireland**



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**NEA NI Consultation Response**

**December 2009**



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## **Older People's Commissioner Northern Ireland**

National Energy Action Northern Ireland (NEA NI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation in relation to the establishment of an Older People's Commissioner in Northern Ireland.

NEA NI is the fuel poverty charity working throughout the United Kingdom, with regional offices in all of the devolved administrations.

The definition of affordable warmth is where a household can achieve temperatures needed to maintain health and comfort for expenditure of less than 10% of income.

Progress had been made in reducing Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2004 (from 27% to 23%) but by 2006 the rate of fuel poverty had increased to 34%, largely as a result of the very significant increases in the price of fuel.

### **Role of an Older People's Commissioner**

NEA NI welcomes the proposed introduction of an Older People's Commissioner for Northern Ireland. However, a role such as this must encompass appropriate powers and a variety of mechanisms to help achieve the goals that the office of the Commissioner has set.

Indeed, NEA NI would suggest that an Older People's Commissioner should have the following powers at their disposal, in order to be effective and contribute positively to the Older population in Northern Ireland. The following powers and actions should be embedded into the office of the Commissioner;

- (1) Ability to demonstrate a clear independence from all other government and public authorities
- (2) Provide a vehicle to mediate on behalf of older people with service providers



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- (3) Power to commission and publish research on issues affecting older people in Northern Ireland
- (4) Communicate widely – seeking the opinion of older people and take their views into account

### **Tackling Poverty among Older People in Northern Ireland**

One of the key challenges faced by the office of the Older People's Commissioner is to tackle the issues of Poverty. These challenges are based on those outlined by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in the initially consultation.

NEA NI would call for the Older People's Commissioner to have a 'Watching Brief', highlighting the cross departmental theme of Older People's issues. Indeed, it should be noted that Older People's issues set in various departments across Government. This is illustrated by the reformatting of the new criteria for the Department of Social Developments fuel poverty tackling tool, the Warm Homes Scheme; resulting in Older people being negatively impacted. This is an example of the need for meaningful cross-departmental working in order to fully benefit Older People in Northern Ireland.

In meeting the challenges of Poverty amongst the older population in Northern Ireland is one that needs to be tackled urgently as levels of poverty amongst older people is linked to increased levels of mortality.

Approximately a third of all pensioners in Northern Ireland are living below the poverty line. Pensioner poverty is said to be the most prevalent in Northern Ireland than the rest of the United Kingdom, with rates 5% higher than the UK average.

Indeed the Housing Condition Survey Northern Ireland 2006 states that the rate of fuel poverty experienced by Older People in Northern Ireland is continuing to rise. Older people are more susceptible to the three factors that that led to fuel poverty; these three factors include (1) low income (2) fuel price and (3) energy efficiency of their dwelling.



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In 2006 55.5% of over 75 year olds in Northern Ireland were living in fuel poverty, paying more than 10% of their annual income on home heating<sup>1</sup>.

This high level of fuel poverty among the over 75's in particular is reflected in a sharp increase in the rates of excess winter deaths in Northern Ireland last year. Provisional statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistic Agency state that there has been a 60% increase in the number of winter/cold related deaths in Northern Ireland in 2008. This is the highest recorded level in 10 years, equating to some 873 deaths among the over 65s. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom where the number of older people who are dying as a direct cause of fuel poverty has increased.

### **Conclusion**

The information discussed above highlights the real need that exists in Northern Ireland to provide a Champion for Older people's issues. NEA NI would welcome the creation of an Older People's Commissioner to deal with the issues raised in this paper; the Commissioner must be effective, dynamic and engaging in order to achieve a better quality of life for Older people in Northern Ireland. Communication with key stakeholders must be sought and maintained and the views of older people must be made an integral part of any action by an Older People's Commissioner in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Housing Condition Survey Northern Ireland 2006,  
[http://www.nihe.gov.uk/housing\\_condition\\_survey\\_2006.pdf](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/housing_condition_survey_2006.pdf)