

Response of Queerspace Collective, Belfast, to the OFMDFM Consultation on an Older persons Commissioner

QueerSpace (QS) is a volunteer-led organisation based on collective planning and action which serves the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Community of Belfast and Northern Ireland by raising its visibility, supporting its activities, providing it with resources and facilitating communication while adhering to the principles of community orientation, freedom of identity, ethical funding and accessibility. Amongst other activities, we organise a twice-monthly drop-in on Saturday afternoons and have weekly collective meetings on Wednesday nights.

As in other areas, QS has been instrumental in initiating a new body in our community, namely L+, a social networking organisation for older LGBT people. This organisation in temporary abeyance and therefore QS is making a brief response to this consultation. Rather than respond to the OFMDFM's questionnaire, we would make the following points.

QS welcomes the proposal to initiate an Office of Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland (COPNI). We have sight of the Age Sector's paper (February 2009) and the CAJ and NICEM responses to the consultation and fully endorse their submissions.

QS wishes to see a powerful and effective COPNI. It should protect the *rights* and interests of older LGB people. These must focus upon international human rights standards, including the Yogyakarta Principles (www.yogyakartaprinciples.com), a declaration of the international human rights standards on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, prepared by a panel of international human rights experts, including Her Excellency Mary Robinson.

These rights include employment and non-employment rights in NI and European law and the need to promote equality of opportunity for people of differing sexual orientation under section 75 of the NI Act 1998.

It should also be treated a Human Rights Institution (HRI) and not merely some form of Ombudsman or Advocate for older LGFB people. In this context, the powers of the COPNI should be consistent with the UN Paris Principles.

The COPNI should be able to take a holistic, strategic approach to the rights and interests of LGB older people.

It should not be subject to restrictions on the basis of the remit of other bodies ('the residuary approach'). This can be dealt with on the basis of memoranda of understanding with other bodies, such as the ECNI and NICCY. The COPNI cannot function effectively on such a basis.

The 'relevant authorities' should include all organisations which have a significant impact on the lives of older LGB people. This must include voluntary, and particularly faith-based, organisations.

To take one example, older LGB people lack partners and a family infrastructure. To be consigned to the care of a faith-based organisation, which is theologically and culturally antagonistic to the rights and interests of older LGB people, is an isolating and intimidating environment to spend the last years of that person's life. The COPNI must be a champion of older LGB people in such circumstances.

We have also received powerful contributions from the carers of older LGBs with dementia. This is an issue which affects a wide range of older people but the predicament of the LGB partners of their loved ones suffering from dementia is particularly acute. The COPNI must dedicate itself to providing a clear commitment to older LGBs and their carers whom have no body to speak on their behalf.

Older LGBs suffer particular deprivation and disadvantage as they come from generations who have no tradition of being 'out' or relating to other LGBs.

Although other bodies, such as the ECNI and the NIHR, can, if they so desired (which they do not), prioritise the rights and interests of LGBs generally, let alone older LGBs.

It is the duty of the COPNI to champion the rights and interests of older LGBs but it needs a wide range of functions and effective powers in order to do so.