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RASHARKIN WOMEN'S GROUP

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Commissioner for Older People
Legislation Team
Office of the First Minister and
Deputy First Minister
Block E, Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast BT4 3BR

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Consultation Response for a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland

Please find below the key points Rasharkin Luncheon Club and Rasharkin Women's Group wish to raise in response to the consultation on the introduction of a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland. This has been informed by a consultation event facilitated by Rural Community Network with over thirty members present.

1. Rasharkin Luncheon Club was established in 2004 through Rasharkin Women's Group to provide a weekly 'healthy living space' for senior citizens in the Rasharkin and outlying areas focusing on mental, physical and emotional well-being. We have a cross-community membership of over thirty-five members and meet on a weekly basis for 30 weeks of the year. Our age range would span from 55 – 90 years of age.

2. Our Luncheon Club would service a rural area with our members facing challenges such as:

- Old age pensions are not enough to meet daily outgoings;
- Feeling safe, particularly at night time;
- The lack of transportation such as rides for essential trips, medical appointments, business errands, shopping and social activities;
- Challenges of accessing affordable leisure and educational classes;
- More imagination and flexibility with regards the services that can be delivered in the Rasharkin area as opposed to people having to travel;
- Isolation from information and support networks, particularly in terms of knowing what benefits they are entitled to and support in accessing them;
- Harder to heat homes in rural areas either because of reliance on oil, solid wall construction and/or general age of houses in rural areas;
- More support for families who are caring for elderly relatives;
- Closure of essential services such as post offices and banks and the closure of bus routes by Translink in rural areas;
- The wish to stay in their own homes as they get older with low level support services seen as critical in allowing this to happen. For example, assistance with small domestic repairs, gardening, lifts to doctors and hospital appointments, fetching and shopping;
- When and if needed appropriate alternative accommodation close to their families;
- The need to link affordable and quality housing with transport and access to services.

Many senior citizens are also increasingly isolated, as family structures have changed with children out at work and perhaps living at some distance. These are all characteristics across rural communities and Rasharkin is no different.

3. Whilst the majority of our members who participated in the consultation were in favour of establishing an Older People's Commissioner, there was a degree of skepticism that this office would make any difference to the issues highlighted above. There was a lack of expectation about what a Commissioner might be able to achieve. This is partly down to a culture of self-reliance that exists, particularly amongst the older generation in rural communities coupled with an attitude that 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. Let's see this Commissioner work first before we place our trust in it. It is important a new Older People's Commissioner is very clear about what they can do

4. Careful consideration should be given to how information on all aspects of the work of an Older People's Commissioner will be communicated. Many rural older people are confused with the number of bodies representing senior citizens interests and how they make an impact on their lives. Information presented to older people should be provided in a concise and non jargon manner and the public should be made aware of how an Older People's Commission can work effectively to improve the quality of life for our ageing population. It is important to recognise that many rural older people are not members of groups or organisations and therefore disseminating information in a way, which will help them understand the role of an Older People's Commissioner is critical. Engaging effectively with churches is also essential in order to reach rural older people.

5. Finally, Rasharkin Luncheon Club supports the Age Sector's 'We agree' campaign and believes the Older People's Commissioner must;

- Be empowered to act independently from all other government and public authorities.

- Be endowed with the capacity to undertake casework and initiate litigation in strategic cases.

- Have the power to mediate on issues of contention between service providers and older people.

- Have an arbitration function exercisable where time is a critical factor.

- Be empowered to conduct formal investigations, issue directives, and conduct audits of compliance and reviews of performance.

- Be endowed with 'victim' status to enable cases to be taken without the requirement to name an individual.

- Have the power to commission and publish research on issues affecting older people, provide information and stimulate debate on issues and models of good practice.

- Have a duty to communicate widely, seek the opinions of older people and take their views into account.

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely

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Rasharkin Women's Group

On behalf of Rasharkin Luncheon Club

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