

Commissioner for Older People
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Consultation Response for a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland

Please find below the key points Rural Community Network [RCN] wishes to raise in response to the consultation on the introduction of a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland. This has been informed by two consultation events we held with Ballywalter Senior Citizens' Club and Rasharkin Luncheon Club as well as a discussion with RCN members. We also support the position paper prepared by the Age Sector.

1. Rural Community Network is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. We have a membership of over 450 across Northern Ireland. RCN is committed to a rural community and networking approach to the planning and development of sustainable rural communities in order to address poverty, social exclusion and equality and to support work towards a shared future.

2. RCN has considerable experience in carrying out participatory research with older people in rural areas and is currently delivering a five-year action research programme, the Skills for Solutions' Programme, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. Its aim is to empower the voice of older people in rural communities through developing skills to engage more effectively in policy making and building civic leadership through identifying solutions to rural transport challenges. We therefore have a significant interest in the proposal to establish a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland (COPNI) and in particular how this office will

actively work with an improve the lives of older people living and working across rural Northern Ireland.

3. Rural communities like all communities in Northern Ireland are experiencing an increasing growth of the ageing population. It is estimated that there is more than 530,000 individuals aged 50 plus living in Northern Ireland accounting for almost one third of the total population (NISRA, Population Estimates, mid 2007). It is generally accepted that there is a notable absence of research highlighting the particular issues about life and ageing for older people living across rural Northern Ireland. However issues that are generally highlighted about rural older people include:

- The degree of social isolation;
- Poor access to services and the lack of involvement in the planning of services;
- The challenge in receiving an adequate health and social care service;
- Adequate transport provision;
- Having enough to live on financially and
- Concerns being taken seriously by key agencies.

Rural Northern Ireland has witnessed many changes over the past number of years such as declining rural services and people having to travel further to work. This can result in families no longer being able to live in close proximity to each other; it is a reality that family support is no longer a guarantee for when we get older. These facts must all be noted when taking into consideration the impact of a Commissioner for Older People would have for our rural ageing population.

4. We would therefore urge OFMDFM to carry out a transparent and effective rural proofing process on their proposals. Whilst we welcome the Rural Impact Assessment in the Integrated Impact Assessment, it falls far short of the Rural Proofing Guidance developed by the Commission for Rural Communities [2009] including the absence of any evidence collated informing the judgements made or any details on proposals suggested. For example, how will the Commissioner for Older People 'support and work with groups to alleviate the problems of older people living in rural areas' (19.1). The purpose of rural proofing is to assess how policies will work for rural people and places and to ensure that policies are implemented fairly and effectively. The benefits of rural proofing include better decision making, improved communication,

strengthening relationships and capacity building. This is critical if the Commissioner is to have credibility and relevance for rural senior citizens.

5. Our consultations also highlighted that older people strongly believe that it is their right to have access to appropriate and timely information and support with regards their entitlements, not benefits. There were strong feelings expressed that after paying taxes and contributing to family, community and work over many years, senior citizens are due entitlements rather than having to seek benefits. It is therefore critical that the Older People's Commissioner works within a strong human rights framework.

6. Whilst RCN welcomes the proposal to establish a Commissioner for Older People, we are concerned that this office will not have the maximum powers available to ensure that it makes a difference to older people. It must have the powers to keep legislation, policy and practice under review and the power to mediate in disputes between older people and service providers. Furthermore it must have investigative powers and the capacity to undertake casework to ensure it can provide resolution for issues impacting on the lives of older people. Finally, and most importantly, a Commissioner must have the powers to enforce its findings beyond "moral pressure" as is indicated in the consultation document (at 11.21). Our consultations with rural older people highlighted that, there is real support for an Older People's Commissioner, but only if they have the power to make a difference. No one was interested in another 'talking shop' particularly in these financially constrained times.

7. The establishment of an effective Older People's Commission should not be a duplication of any other service or body that is currently available. An Older People's Commission should act as a champion for older people both individually and as a general population grouping throughout all parts of Northern Ireland. The Commissioner should be the voice of older people and make a difference by influencing policy, challenging service delivery and raising awareness of the needs of older people.

8. Careful consideration should be given to how information on all aspects of the work of an Older People's Commissioner will develop. During Rural Community Network's consultations, many rural older people were 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.

9. Forms of engagement with the public must also be regarded carefully as many older people have suggested that the credibility of such a Commission will be more accepted if it regularly engages with older people in their groups, clubs and communities, keeps up to date with relevant issues taking place and reports back on the progress of its work.

10. The person who heads up this Commission was also considered a very important point to consider with personal qualities such as being strong and articulate, challenging, and having the ability to connect with all people from all backgrounds cited as essential characteristics.


11. Finally, RCN 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


Rural Older People's Coordinator
Rural Community Network

