



speaking from experience

Feedback to Department of Finance
**‘Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary
Outlook 2018-20’**

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1. Introduction

Age Sector Platform (ASP) represents a strong unified voice for older people in Northern Ireland. It is the charity responsible for the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP).

Age Sector Platform has a membership of individuals and older people's groups across Northern Ireland, representing approximately 200,000 people. Launched in 2008, the organisation emerged from the Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG) which was in operation for seven years.

ASP's mission is to be a strong unified voice for older people in Northern Ireland and its vision is a society where older people's voices are heard, respected and acted upon. ASP engages with older people allowing them to make their voice heard and enables them to advocate on their own behalf. This empowers older people so they can change their lives for the better.

Age Sector Platform welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Finance on its budget briefing document, and commends the Department on its willingness to engage with the public on such important decisions.

Our response will focus on several income generation and policy review proposals that we feel will impact on older people in particular. Our response is evidence based and summarises the views of older people across Northern Ireland through our ongoing engagement with them.

2. Raising Additional Revenue

Concessionary Fares

In 2016, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP) passed the following motion:

NIPP calls for the Smartpass to be protected for everyone over the age of 60 regardless of income.

The Smartpass is one of the most valued benefits received by older people in Northern Ireland. It provides social, financial and health benefits and also means older people are more mobile, spending their money in more places, which clearly benefits the economy. The Smartpass scheme also provides stability for the public transport system - without it, bus and rail services for everyone would suffer.

There has been some discussion in recent times regarding the 60-64 Smartpass and its use by people travelling to work. An article from the NI Assembly's Research & Information Service¹ in December 2017 concluded: "evidence does not suggest Smartpasses are being widely used for commuting purposes." It also noted that "the majority of use (84%) occurs outside peak hours for activities such as shopping, social and recreation activities, and health appointments - activities which clearly align with the scheme's objectives."

In September 2015, Age Sector Platform conducted research into the benefits of the Smartpass scheme² (1,342 survey responses from older people aged 50+ across NI). We found that three quarters (75%) of older people said the Smartpass keeps them more mobile and active, more than two thirds (69%) said it helps them keep in touch with friends and family and more than half (56%) agreed that the Smartpass prevents them from feeling lonely / isolated. The *Campaign to End Loneliness* asserts that loneliness and social isolation is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day³; therefore the social and health benefits of the Smartpass must not be under-estimated.

Finally, our research revealed that almost half (45%) said they could not afford to do all of the things they do now if they didn't have their Smartpass. 57% of the 60-64 age group in Northern Ireland are not in employment⁴ and despite the increasing state pension age, many of those within that age group will continue to be unable to work due to health reasons. For these people, the Smartpass fulfils its objective "*to promote social inclusion by improving public transport accessibility*".

Clearly there is a cost associated with supplying those aged 60-64 with free travel; however, it is our view that this cost is an investment in the health and wellbeing of the older generation in Northern Ireland and there is a massive return on this investment – socially and economically.

Age Sector Platform disagrees with "*ceasing new applications for the 60 - 64 SmartPass and by linking the age of eligibility for the Senior SmartPass to the State Pension Age.*"

¹ [Is the continued provision of free travel for 60-64 year olds sustainable? Research Matters 8 Dec 2017](#)

² [NIPP Smartpass Survey September 2015](#)

³ [Campaign to End Loneliness](#)

⁴ [Labour Force Survey Quarterly Supplement Tables July-September 2017](#)

Prescription Charges

In 2016, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP) passed the following motion:

NIPP calls for the retention of free prescriptions for everyone over the age of 60 regardless of income.

During 2014/15, Age Sector Platform collected more than 20,000 signatures in support of the 'Hands Off' campaign, defending the need for universal pensioner benefits including prescription charges. This sends a clear message to policy makers - older people should not be penalised for poor health. Older people typically require more medicines than most to maintain a good quality of life and should not be penalised because of their circumstances.

In May 2015, Age Sector Platform conducted research on older people's views of the health service here⁵ (698 survey responses from older people aged 60+ across NI). That research uncovered that four out of five (83%) older people do not believe they should have to pay for prescriptions. Comments highlighted issues of affordability, in addition to the impact on individuals and the health service if prescriptions were not taken due to a person's inability to pay. Three out of five (61%) of those surveyed said they would cut down on other essentials or pick and choose between prescriptions if they were forced to pay. It could be argued that the impact these actions would have on a person's health and well-being, and consequently on the health service here, would offset the savings made by charging for prescriptions.

During January 2018, Age Sector Platform conducted a survey with older people aged 50+ on some of the Department's budget briefing proposals⁶. The survey collected 444 responses from older people across Northern Ireland, and revealed that the vast majority of older people still believe they should be exempt from prescription charges - four out of five (79%) agreeing with this position. There was uncertainty from respondents about whether prescription charges should be introduced at all (47% agreed, 47% disagreed and 6% were unsure).

The 'Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20' mentions an estimated income of £20m. We surmise this is based on the introduction of prescription charges with previous exemption categories. Age Sector Platform supports an exemption for people aged 60+ in Northern Ireland.

⁵ [NIPP Health & Social Care Survey May 2015](#)

⁶ [NIPP Budget Survey Jan 2018](#)

Broadening of Community Care Services

During January 2018, Age Sector Platform conducted a survey with older people aged 50+ on some of the Department's budget briefing proposals⁷. The survey collected 444 responses from older people across Northern Ireland, and revealed that three in five (59%) did not agree with people in receipt of domiciliary care having to pay towards its cost.

The 'Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20' mentions an estimated income of £11.3m - £22.5m, and from our understanding this is based on every person receiving domiciliary care paying 5% or 10% towards the cost of their care. This would mean an annual bill of approximately £487 or £970 for many older people already struggling to make ends meet.

As part of our Budget Survey, we put forward a number of different payment scenarios including no-one paying, a voluntary payment and a mandatory 5% or 10% payment. One thing is clear – there is no overwhelming support for any system of payment.

The scenario with the most support was that those in receipt of pension credit should be exempt from paying towards the cost of domiciliary care, with more than two out of three (68%) agreeing with this statement.

The statement with the least support was "a 10% fee (around £970) is an affordable contribution for people to make to their domiciliary care". Around four out of five (79%) disagreed with this statement.

It appears there is considerable opposition to charging for domiciliary care amongst older people. However, if introduced "*charging arrangements should be based on the principle that where a person can afford to contribute to the cost of a service they should do so*" (recommendation put forward in the recent report 'Power to People: Proposals to reboot adult care & support in NI). Some older people are already making decisions between 'heating or eating', and we must ensure these older people continue to receive adequate care at home regardless of whether they can afford to pay.

In regards to the proposal to increase the cost of meals-on-wheels by 133%, from £1.50 per meal to £3.50 per meal, there is significant opposition from older people. Our Budget Survey uncovered that almost three in five (58%) disagreed with this proposal⁸.

At March 2017, 1,846 people were in receipt of meals-on-wheels in Northern Ireland, with 80% aged 75 or older⁹. Numbers receiving this service have decreased drastically (by 40%) over the last four years and therefore spending in this area is already being reduced, purportedly due to the roll-out of 'reablement'.

For those people still receiving the service, provision of healthy meals is an important preventative health measure. Age Sector Platform notes with concern the reduction in the number of people receiving a meals-on-wheels service and opposes such a huge increase to the cost of their meals.

⁷ NIPP Budget Survey Jan 2018

⁸ NIPP Budget Survey Jan 2018

⁹ Statistics on Community Care for Adults in NI 2016-2017

3. Review of existing policies

Non- Emergency Patient Transport

In 2016, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP) passed the following motion:

NIPP calls for better provision and promotion of public transport, community transport and hospital travel schemes to improve older people's ability to travel to hospital appointments.

In October 2016, Age Sector Platform conducted research into older people's experiences of travelling to hospital appointments¹⁰ (637 survey responses from older people aged 60+ across NI). Almost half (45%) of respondents said they experienced difficulty in travelling to hospital appointments within the last two years. One in five (19%) had cancelled a hospital appointment due to problems with transport, and one in seven (14%) had missed a hospital appointment due to problems with transport. 94% of respondents had never availed of the non-emergency ambulance passenger transport scheme; with almost three out of four (74%) having never heard of it. This challenges the notion that the scheme is being "*incorrectly used by patients who could use alternative services for their journey*". In fact, knowledge and use of the scheme is low.

It is clear from our research that transport to hospital is already a problem for many older people in Northern Ireland, and limiting the resources for the non-emergency patient transport scheme would undoubtedly impact on attendance rates at hospital appointments. These missed appointments will cost the health service money and will also impact on the individual's health and wellbeing, which will in itself cost more money to the health service in the longer term.

Age Sector Platform opposes the introduction of new eligibility criteria and booking procedures that would further limit resources for the non-emergency patient transport.

¹⁰ [NIPP Transport to Hospital Appointments Report October 2016](#)

4. Conclusion

In summary, Age Sector Platform welcomes the opportunity to respond to this briefing document and looks forward to important budgetary decisions being made in the coming months.

Agreement on a budget for Northern Ireland covering the next few years is essential in order to reassure people of all ages that public services will be delivered without delay. Decisions should be made in line with the priorities set out in the Programme for Government. Age Sector Platform reiterates its call to include an additional outcome in the PfG – *'We respect, value and protect our older people'* – in order to recognise the significance of the ageing population and to reflect the role and contribution older people make in our society. We note with disappointment the lack of this additional outcome in the recently released working draft of the Programme for Government Framework, and will continue to engage with the Executive Office on this matter.

It is our view that the short term gains in income achieved through prescription charges, community care charges and changes to transport schemes for older people would result in longer term financial consequences for the public purse as a result of increased ill-health and social isolation. It is vitally important that Government recognises the value of public services that act in a preventative manner and provide adequate funding for these.

We have used this response to highlight the concerns of older people in relation to some of the suggested income generation and policy review proposals, and we hope our evidence and comments have been useful.