



**Response to Draft Programme for
Government**

2011-2015: Building a Better Future

Introduction

Age Sector Platform (ASP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's Draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-2015: Building a Better Future (PfG).

Age Sector Platform, which was established in 2008, is a charity which supports older people to have their say on the issues that matter most to their lives. The organisation has a membership base of 35 older people's organisations and networks which represent approximately 200,000 older people across Northern Ireland.

As an organisation that facilitates older people to have their say and reach a consensus on the priority issues, we believe this to be a very important document as it creates a framework and focus for the work of Government during this term of the NI Assembly. In this response we have focused on the main issues that we want to comment on but we have also attached the NI Pensioners Parliament 2011 report as supporting evidence to these comments and to provide a more detailed breakdown of the concerns of older people across Northern Ireland. While it is important that a framework is in place to guide Government in the years ahead, we also believe the NI Executive and Assembly must be flexible and respond positively and effectively to any major problems any section of society faces in the next four years.

General Comments

- Age Sector Platform (ASP) recognises that the Programme for Government needs to prioritise the areas where the NI Executive needs to take action to improve the lives of citizens throughout Northern Ireland, and that it is not possible for the programme to list all the important issues faced by our population at this time. However, it is important that the PfG identifies the 'big issues' that affect people's lives and outlines challenging but realistic targets for making progress against these issues.
- We recognise that we are in difficult financial times and agree with the view that every penny needs to be used wisely and effectively. To ensure that this happens, we believe that it is important to engage with the people who are the recipients of the various government services and schemes. While we recognise money is tight we believe that there are opportunities to spend it better and listening to the views of people should be central to this process.
- ASP is pleased that some of the top concerns of older people have been included in the list of commitments. In particular, we welcome the commitment to introduce legislation to outlaw age discrimination in relation to the provision of goods, facilities and services and to introduce a range of measures to tackle crime and the fear of crime among older people. We also welcome the commitment to introduce a range of fuel poverty measures as 'keeping warm in winter' is the top concern of older people across Northern Ireland.
- However, while we welcome the above specific commitments ASP is disappointed that the programme does not embrace the challenge of our ageing population in a positive way. ASP is concerned with the ongoing absence of a strong, new cross-departmental ageing strategy which could provide a co-ordinated approach to tackle many of the problems older people at this time.

- ASP recognises the importance of developing a strong, diverse economy and believes that all citizens will benefit if our local economy becomes stronger and more vibrant. Therefore, we recognise the rationale in making the economy the number one priority in the programme for government. However, we believe that supporting the growth of the economy and protecting the most vulnerable in society are not conflicting aims but can be mutually supportive, and we don't believe that this link has been properly alluded to in the Programme for Government document.
- Older people play a key role in society and contribute in many ways. For example, many older people remain in the workplace, run businesses, provide employment, act as carers, and provide vital childcare services that enable many people, and especially women, to remain active in employment and contribute significantly to our local economy.
- ASP is disappointed that the strategy does not refer to older people in a more positive light. The vast majority of references throughout the strategy refer to older people as dependent citizens, and most focus is on supporting them through the health and social care system or in relation to community safety initiatives. Of course, these issues are very important and should be in the strategy but more reference to the positive role that older people can play could have been included with greater recognition of the valuable volunteering contribution they make.
- We welcome the commitment to tackle many of the top issues that affect older people such as fuel poverty, fear of crime, age discrimination and health and social care. However, the lack of detail makes it difficult to provide detailed comment on plans at this stage but Age Sector Platform, along with others, is ready to play its part in working with Government and others to help develop effective solutions across the priority areas.

- ASP is disappointed that the PfG does not provide any commitment to support the work of the older peoples groups and forums playing a pivotal role in local communities to keep older people active as these activities have many positive benefits to individuals and wider society yet receive very little public expenditure support.

2 Older People and the Economy

The main aim of the PfG is on the economy and ASP understands the reasons for focusing on this. It appears strange however that the economic contribution and potential of older people is not properly recognised in the strategy, especially with changing demographics meaning that older people will play an increasingly important part in supporting the new developing economy in Northern Ireland.

ASP believes that older people make a valuable contribution to the economy either directly by working themselves, by acting as carers, by providing childcare support to enable others to work or by simply spending money in the local economy. A report published in 2007 stated that older people had an estimated spend of £5.7 billion per year in the Northern Ireland economy¹ and with the older population set to increase significantly in the next decade this will continue to increase.

The economic benefits of supporting older people to keep active is often underestimated or almost ignored. ASP believes that the provision of free public transport for older people continues to be a policy decision that reaps often overlooked benefits for society. As well as keeping older people more active, which in turn leads to health benefits and less dependency on the healthcare system, this provides many older people with the opportunity to contribute to the economy through volunteering and childcare provision but also to simply purchase goods and services across Northern Ireland.

¹ 'Silver Service? Are supermarkets meeting the needs of older shoppers?' Consumer Council, 2007

3 Tackling Poverty and Disadvantage

The PfG sets out tackling poverty and disadvantage as a priority for the next Assembly term and in particular singles out fuel poverty as a particular area for action. This is welcome as 'Keeping warm in winter' was the biggest concern of older people at the 2011 NI Pensioners Parliament² and the continuing high cost of heating your home is causing misery and ill health for thousands of older people each year.

Almost a quarter of pensioners in Northern Ireland are living in poverty (23%) while the majority live in fuel poverty which threatens the NI Executive commitment to help older fully participate in the social, civic and political life of society.

4 Fuel Poverty

The commitment to tackle fuel poverty is welcome but must be followed by a well resourced and funded strategy to tackle the root causes of this scourge of modern society. Lifting older people out of fuel poverty has to be a key priority for the Assembly as it is a major problem that is getting worse by the year.

Almost half (49%) of all households that were fuel poor were headed by persons aged 60 or more. Persons aged between 60 and 74 (52.9%) and 75 plus (75.8%) were more likely to be living in fuel poverty, compared to only 31.7% of reference persons aged between 25 and 39 and 33.6% of those aged between 40 and 59.

Households in Northern Ireland are already spending around 60 per cent more of their disposable income on energy than the UK average (Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, February 2011). The majority (68 per cent) of households use home heating oil to heat their homes and will on average have a combined oil and electricity bill of around £2114.

² 'NI Pensioners Parliament Report 2011, Age Sector Platform, 2011

5 Pensioner Poverty

Pensioner poverty is a major issue but the strategy makes no mention of tackling this, despite the fact that failing to tackle this problem will increasingly lead to further and unsustainable strain on the public purse through increased healthcare and other costs.

However, ASP believes that there are potential opportunities for boosting the economy and tackling poverty through the same actions. The only way to tackle pensioner poverty is to boost the income of pensioners and particularly those on the lowest incomes. Most of the control over pensioner income remains the responsibility of the UK Government at Westminster as it decides on the level of state pension, pension credit, winter fuel payments and other benefits. However, this does not mean that the NI Executive can play a passive role in tackling pensioner poverty but instead must do all it can to influence the UK Government on levels of financial support for our older population.

6 Automatic Payment of Pension Credit

Age Sector Platform (ASP) believes the current system of means testing pension credit has failed to ensure that many of the most vulnerable older people in society are provided with enough money to have a decent, safe and healthy later life.

ASP agrees with the Government's analysis that the current pensions and benefits system is too complicated and that steps need to be taken to simplify the system to ensure people get what they are entitled to. The reality is that means testing has not worked as many of the most vulnerable people in society have not received what they are entitled to due to the complexity of the system.

Despite a number of initiatives to promote benefit uptake amongst older people it is estimated that the average amount of weekly unclaimed Pension Credit is estimated to lie in the range £1.2m to £2.3m per week. ³

³ A2B (2009) *A2B Benefit Take-Up Initiative Mid-Term Evaluation Report*. PEER Consulting & Economic Research and Evaluation

A NI Audit Office report highlighted that the barriers to benefit uptake for pensioners included

- perceived ineligibility
- the complexity of the system
- the claims process
- lack of awareness

The automatic payment of Pension Credit would address many of the barriers pensioners face and has the potential to significantly impact on the issue of poverty and improve the lives of people in later life. There is also a strong economic argument for automatic payments which should not be underestimated. The additional income could afford older people a better quality of life, increase local spending and boost the Northern Ireland economy. If this issue isn't addressed, pensioner poverty will continue to increase.

7 Ageing Strategy

Age Sector Platform (ASP) is very surprised and concerned by the absence of a new Ageing Strategy within the Programme for Government and would seek clarification on the status of a new strategy to replace the 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society' strategy. ASP, along with many other organisations, provided a huge amount of input into the review of this strategy and the development of a new, cross-cutting strategy over the past few years but there has been nothing concrete to emerge from this work. The expectation had been that the strategy would be published prior to the NI Assembly elections in May 2011 but nine months later the status of this remains unclear.

A lot of work has gone into producing a broad based draft strategy which seeks to improve joined up working across government departments so that some of the major problems that older people face in Northern Ireland could start to be addressed. There is some suggestion that the newly appointed Commissioner for

Older People (COPNI) would take forward this strategy in some way but some clarification on this would be useful.

8 Age Discrimination

Age Sector Platform warmly welcomes the commitment to introduce legislation to outlaw age discrimination in relation to goods, facilities and services and looks forward to work on this starting immediately. Older people in Northern Ireland have fallen behind their counterparts in the rest of the UK and Ireland in relation to the protection they receive in relation to age discrimination and therefore progress on developing this legislation should be a top priority. ASP believes that the work that has been done on this, particularly in Great Britain over the past few years, can help accelerate progress on this matter.

It is important that every effort is made to ensure this legislation covers as broad a range as possible and that there should be very few if any exclusion's from the legislation once introduced to make sure it has the desired impact on people's lives.

ASP would also highlight that any proposed changes under the Compton Review would need to be 'Age discrimination proof' and the NI Executive should carefully consider any changes it makes in relation to this legislation to avoid potential challenges in the future.

9 Tackle Crime against older people

ASP also welcomes the clear commitment to tackle crimes against older people and in particular the fear of crime that exists among many of our older population, a fear that leads to increased levels of isolation, exclusion and disengagement from society.

The 2011 NI Pensioners Parliament identified this as one of the biggest concerns of pensioners and early indications from our 2012 survey suggest this fear hasn't eased since last year. ASP has consistently highlighted this as a major problem for older

people across every county and much more concrete action is needed if this fear is to be addressed.

ASP firmly believes that lowering the levels of fear among older people will have benefits not just for those individuals but for wider society as it will reduce depression, anxiety and increase active ageing and participation of older people in the wider community. Therefore, it is vital that a strategy to combat crime and the fear of crime is properly resourced so that real progress can be made on this issue.

10 Engagement with the Community

Age Sector Platform welcomes the importance placed in the document on engaging with the community in relation to discussing and implementing the commitments outlined in the draft PfG. ASP believes that a healthy and effective democracy should be close to the people affected by decisions from government and welcomes the 'partnership approach' being referred to throughout the document.

The strategy refers to developing new ways to engage with communities and for communities to engage with each other and ASP believes this is a positive approach to take. ASP believes that the age sector is a good example where this is already happening and our own organisation is one example of how a cross community approach can lead to identifying common social problems and identifying possible solutions. The NI Pensioners Parliament is also an example of how people from different geographical, religious, ethnic and political backgrounds can come together to discuss the issues they face and reach consensus on what are the priorities for government and others at any specific point in time.

Other Comments

Age Sector Platform welcomes a number of other commitments in the PfG and these are summarised below.

- We welcome the decision to keep Regional Rates bills at current levels given the extreme financial pressures that pensioners and many others in society are currently experiencing at the moment to make ends meet. We also welcome the commitment that there will be no additional water charges introduced during the life of this assembly for the same reason.
- We welcome the commitment to invest in social enterprises as we believe that organisations in the community sector have the ability to build on their skills and expertise to develop their services and develop them into business propositions.
- We welcome the continued commitment to have money set aside in Social Investment and Protection Funds to help communities and individuals. We commend OFMdFM for using the Social Protection Fund this winter to help people cope with the rising cost of energy prices and believe that this is a good example of Government listening to the problems people are facing and taking some action to alleviate them, even if it is only for the short term. We would like to continue to see this fund made available to help people out in emergency situations in the future.
- We also welcome the commitment to improve online access to government services but it is important that steps are taken to ensure older people are not left behind in relation to information on government services as this group are less likely to have access to the Internet. We welcome the review of existing online services and would recommend that Government measures to what level these services are accessed by the older population. The Internet, if used correctly, can help to tackle isolation but it can also increase exclusion for the older

population if the proper support and alternatives are not put in place for those without online access.

- While there are many references to improving the education and learning of our population, it is disappointing to see that there is no commitment to support training or educational opportunities for older people in the strategy. Evidence shows that there has been an increase in unemployment for people over 50, and that older people experience increased difficulty in re-entering employment. Therefore, if we are going to fully utilise and support our older workforce more needs to be done in terms of training and re-skilling opportunities. We would also like to see a commitment to support lifelong learning as this also enables older people to remain active and engaged in learning and social activities which can bring health benefits in later life.

Conclusion

In summary, we welcome the publication of this Draft Programme for Government and the opportunity to respond to its contents. We welcome the commitments to tackle fuel poverty, fear of crime and age discrimination and look forward to action plans and implementation timescales being developed in the near future. There is much detail to still to be added to how these commitments will be met and Age Sector Platform is ready to play its role in helping to develop and implement solutions to tackle these major areas of concern for older people.

We have attached to our response the final report of the NI Pensioners Parliament from 2011 which outlines in more detail the big issues facing older people in Northern Ireland at this time. The NI Pensioners Parliament will be having a series of events in the coming months and years and we hope that the findings of these events will be considered as the PfG gets reviewed and updated.

Age Sector Platform is currently planning the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament 2012 which will be held in May this year and we are hoping to have a plenary session on the Programme for Government and will be inviting relevant Ministers to attend this event in due course. This event provides an excellent opportunity to continue to work with representatives of older people from across Northern Ireland and we hope that this years' event can be used to feed into the developing action plans to support the final Programme for Government.

Age Sector Platform Members

Age NI

ALLY Foyle

Amicus Retired Members

AT&GWU Retired Members Association

Carers NI

Castlereagh Lifestyle Forum

Chinese Welfare Association

Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance (CSPA)

Communications Workers Union (NI Regional Retired Members)

East Belfast Seniors Forum

Engage with Age

Friendship Federation

GMB Retired Members

Greater Shankill Senior Citizens' Forum

Indian Community Centre 50+ Club

NASUWT Retired Members Association

National Federation of Occupational Pensioners

Newry and Mourne Senior Citizens' Consortium

Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum

NIC ICTU Retired Workers Committee

North Belfast Senior Citizens Forum

Northern Ireland Pensioners Convention

Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) Retired Members Association

Older Women's Network

Pensioners Actively Lobbying Services (PALS)

Public Commercial Services Union (Associate and Retired Members)

Sperrin Lakeland Senior Citizens' Consortium

UNISON Retired Members

University of the Third Age (NI)

West Belfast 50+ Forum

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