



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

The Equality Officer
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
Riada House
14 Charles Street
Ballymoney
BT53 6DZ

e. equality@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk

06.03.24

Re: Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council Age-Friendly Strategy and Action Plan

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing on behalf of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) regarding Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council's Age-Friendly Strategy and Action Plan. COPNI welcomes the opportunity to engage with this consultation.

The Commissioner supports the vision and outcome statements of the Strategy and Action Plan, as well as the approach taken to develop same. The Commissioner is pleased that steps have been taken to ensure older people's voices and concerns are reflected in the Strategy and Action Plan through the co-design process and various engagements, surveys, and focus groups. COPNI is particularly encouraged that 430 of Causeway Coast and Glens' older people contributed to the development of the Strategy and Action Plan.

The Commissioner is particularly impressed by the Council's recognition that the Strategy and Action Plan can only be considered a starting point in supporting the 46,000 older people that live in Causeway Coast and Glens to age well. In this light, he welcomes the acknowledgement that a 'cycle of engaging, planning, implementing, and evaluating' is required to keep pace with the changing needs of the ageing population.

In relation to the specific outcomes and actions, COPNI offers several comments below.

Outcome 1: (Older) People in the Borough have opportunities to improve health and wellbeing and can access appropriate services.

The World Health Organisation tells us that ageing can involve a "gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity" and "a growing risk of disease".¹ As the population of Northern Ireland

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

continues to age, our health and social care system and support services must evolve to meet and keep pace with the changing health and wellbeing needs of the population. COPNI therefore welcomes the proposal for annual health MOT checks for older people and hopes that these will be implemented in the very near future. COPNI previously recommended health checks for older people aged 75 and above as a way to ensure older people got effective and appropriate support when needed. In light of this, we are pleased to see Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and the Northern Trust working to implement the health checks.

The document tells us that older people highlighted the disjointedness of services, where they are only accessing some but not all services supposedly available to them. COPNI is therefore encouraged by the commitment to promote joined-up, wraparound health services and campaigns, which will go a long way in increasing access to services.

Loneliness is similarly highlighted in the Strategy as both a global phenomenon and a serious social issue prevalent in our own society. It has been observed that older age can be a contributing factor to experiencing loneliness. NISRA's *Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23*, revealed that those aged 75 and over in Northern Ireland reported significantly higher proportions of loneliness than other age groups, with 22.6% of people in this group experiencing loneliness. COPNI is therefore encouraged by the Council's specific outcome to address loneliness among older recipients of care, older people with disabilities and older people with dementia. Similarly, COPNI welcomes outcomes to promote wellbeing and staying active, such as promoting the use of outdoor spaces, developing intergenerational programmes, and exploring the potential for concessions for older people accessing leisure centres.

Outcome 2: (Older) People in the Borough can access suitable forms of transport.

In Northern Ireland, 23% of the population live in a rural area 60 minutes or more from Belfast, with a further 13% living in a rural area less than 60 minutes from Belfast.² For those who reside in rural areas, particularly older residents, transport is key.

A common concern among many people who reside in rural areas is the lack of public transport. The 2020 *Travel Survey* showed time spent travelling by Metro or Ulsterbus per person per year varies significantly across the urban/rural split. An individual who lives in a rural area spends just 7 hours travelling by Metro and Ulsterbus per year, compared to one

² https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/NI%20IN%20PROFILE_1.pdf

who lives in an urban area, spending 18 hours per year.³ Consequently, COPNI welcomes the prioritising of rural transport and other means to address the transport needs of older people such as community transport and links to hospitals.

COPNI supports the Strategy and Action Plan's advocacy for the Concessionary Fares SmartPass scheme. The Commissioner unequivocally opposes the proposal for the narrowing of eligibility for the SmartPass.

Outcome 3: (Older) People in the Borough are supported to live independently, safely, and efficiently.

COPNI welcomes the Council's efforts to address the cost-of-living crisis through various measures. The Commissioner commends the Warm Welcome Spaces initiative which offers cost-of-living support, and a range of social activities aimed at reducing levels of social isolation.

The *Lived Experience 2021* report estimated that 80,000 older people in Northern Ireland live alone.⁴ COPNI maintains that compassionate support services, such as befriending and good morning calls, are effective ways to combat loneliness and encourage independent living among older people in the Borough, particularly for those living alone.

COPNI welcomes the Council's commitment to supporting independent living through assistive technologies, telecare services and occupational therapy. The use of assistive technologies offer opportunities for our ageing population by promoting "autonomy, safety... communication" among older people⁵, as well as also reducing the need for relocations to social housing. Nevertheless, we would advise against any policy developments predicated on the view that technology can replace human support or provide all of the answers to health and social care issues.

The need for social housing is increasing due to our rapidly ageing population. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive describes the process of ensuring there is appropriate and secure housing to accommodate the diversity of an ageing population as "one of the greatest challenges". The Executive reported that, at March 2020, of the 38,745 applicants on the social housing waiting list, 6,065 were older people, equating to 16%. In 2019/2020, of the 16,802

³ <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.daera-ni.gov.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Fdaera%2FTravel%2520Survey%25202020.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

⁴ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-ni/media/lived-experience-2021.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9016506/>



homelessness presenters in Northern Ireland, 13% of them were older people.⁶ In this context, COPNI is encouraged by the Council's specific outcome to advocate for the development of age-friendly housing.

Outcome 4: (Older) People in the Borough can access relevant knowledge and information.

Digital exclusion is a common concern for many older people. A 2023 report established that digital exclusion places older people at risk of missing out on crucial information and services that can support them to live well. Consequently, COPNI is encouraged that improving older people's digital skills and working to achieve digital inclusion for older people is a priority for Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

However, it is worth noting that some older people may be unable to access the internet either through disability, impairment, or economic factors. A major concern for many older people is the move to online-only service provision, with little or no offline alternative. Ofcom (2022) reported that, in the UK, the platforms older people use the most to obtain information are newspapers and television.⁷ COPNI is therefore pleased that the Council is exploring other means of communication to ensure maximum accessibility. The Council's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility through offline alternatives, such as publishing age-friendly events in local papers, is key to ensuring more older people are aware of the support and services available to them.

Similarly, in terms of accessibility of relevant information, COPNI commends the proposed efforts to collate all services for older people into one point of contact. This should go some way in creating awareness among older people of what is available in the Borough to facilitate ageing well for all citizens.

Finally, COPNI commends the Strategy and Action Plan and is encouraged that it will serve to effectively support the older people of Causeway Coast and Glens.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this response, or the Strategy and Action Plan, further should it necessary or helpful.

Best wishes,

⁶ <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/a314ce42-0a79-4cda-8fd7-5d0808bd8167/older-peoples-housing-strategy.pdf>

⁷ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

Anna Doran

Policy Advice and Research Unit

Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

e. anna.doran@copni.org