



Commissioner for **Older People**  
for Northern Ireland

Oral Health Consultation  
Department of Health  
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4<sup>th</sup> March 2024

**RE: *Oral Health Improvement Plans for Children and Older Persons in Northern Ireland***

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing in response to your request for feedback on the proposed Oral Health Improvement Plans for Children and Older Persons in Northern Ireland.

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) welcomes the decision to adopt a targeted approach that prioritises the dental health of the older population. The plan for improving oral health in our older population is detailed, realistic and comprehensive. The thematic recommendations, indicate that the Department of Health is approaching oral health from key perspectives, including a focus on patient health; the labour force pipeline and skills development; knowledge among general health worker and carers; and oral health governance. COPNI expects that engagement with recommendations across each theme will result in patient-centred, holistic oral care for older people from all walks of life. Further feedback across each of the proposed themes is set out below:

- **Theme 1 - Improving oral and dental health of older people:** The Department references the use of a multi-professional approach, calling for improved preventative and operative care for older adults, and acknowledges the additional needs of Care Home residents. The Department also

recommends a standardised Oral Health Risk Assessment for triage and ongoing dental care of Nursing Home residents. Each of these steps will help in addressing the elevated prevalence of oral health problems in older people,<sup>1</sup> and will align services to the Enhancing Clinical Care Framework (ECCF).<sup>2</sup>

- **Theme 2 – Utilising the skills of the dental team:** While COPNI cannot speak to all recommendations included under theme 2, the consideration of patients with complex needs and recommendations to tailor training programmes to meet these distinctive needs is welcome. Should these recommendations be brought forward we hope that the intervention will help address the barriers in domiciliary care already identified in the Northern Ireland context.<sup>3</sup>
- **Theme 3 – Empowering families and allied healthcare professionals:** Preventative care and a multidisciplinary approach are once again highlighted under theme 3. The inclusion of both is welcome, with available best practice highlighting how preventative and individualised oral care treatments support better and more cost-effective outcomes.<sup>4</sup>
- **Theme 4 – Governance:** COPNI agrees that oral health should be considered within existing Public Health strategic frameworks as poor oral health can be linked to wider health concerns, such as nutritional problems and a poorer overall quality of life. COPNI also agrees that oral health in a Nursing Home setting should be factored into existing inspection standards and routine processes, due to the associated risks in this setting outlined in the Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> [Oral health in the elderly patient and its impact on general well-being: a nonsystematic review - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Health funding in Northern Ireland - Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - House of Commons \(parliament.uk\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [General dentists' attitudes and perceived barriers in providing domiciliary dental care to older adults in long-term care facilities or their homes in Northern Ireland: A descriptive qualitative study - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Policies Supporting Oral Health in Ageing Populations Are Needed Worldwide - ScienceDirect](#)



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Overall, this is a well-researched plan that offers relevant evidence on the oral health situation in Northern Ireland and provides a clear rationale for the proposed recommendations. The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland welcomes the Department's approach to addressing the diversity within our older population and its measured recommendations to improve oral health among this cohort.

I would be delighted to engage further on this response and the Oral Health Improvement Plan if that would be useful.

Best regards

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**Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland**

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