

# OLDER PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

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## The Older People's Parliament

The Older People's Parliament took place at Stormont on Saturday 12th October 2024.

The Parliament followed the protocol for all NI Assembly debates, including speeches on an agreed motion and interventions by assembled speakers.

This published record includes some speeches pre-prepared before the Parliament though not delivered, and the order that the interventions are published here does not follow the order that took place within the chamber on the day. This publication is intended as a record of the important views affecting older people in 2024, in their own words.

Following a warm welcome from the Deputy Speaker, the Clerk of the Assembly introduced the business of the day:

"That the Parliament expresses disappointment with the minimal mention of older people in the draft Programme for Government; calls on the Executive to place the rights of older people at the centre of the new Programme for Government to address issues such as health, housing, transport, loneliness, poverty and safety; and further calls on the Executive to include affirmative, measurable actions in the new Programme for Government that will meet the needs of all older people."



## Previous Older People's Parliaments

by Anne Watson



Thank you all for coming today. I hope we will have a great event and we should leave with more knowledge and information than we came with.

The organising of today's event has been supported by a consultative panel with members representing a range of older people's groups and organisations who work with older people across Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the Panel I would like to thank the Deputy Speaker for presiding over this Parliament and allowing this event to take place in the Assembly Chamber. I'd also like to thank the MLAs who have come to meet us today and listen to the debate.

In recent weeks the Panel has been holding meetings to design the format of the Parliament, agree the issues to and nominate speakers with lived experience.

A public survey was conducted to identify the key issues to be discussed during the Parliament which received almost 1,700 responses. There were nine priority issues identified from the survey. We're here today to highlight why those issues are important and what action needs to be taken in the Programme for Government.

I would like to reflect on how this Older People's Parliament builds on a long history of Pensioners' Parliament events that many of us here today were involved in.

The Pensioners' Parliament was an initiative of Age Sector Platform and it started with a survey and a number of local events in Spring 2011. Then, 180 of us came together for two days in June 2011, discussing the issues that are important for older people and passing a total of 24 motions. We worked very hard - participants had to commit to both days and sessions lasted from 10am to 3pm. Lunch which was always well received.

We then took three motions to be debated in the Senate Chamber here in Parliament Buildings in November 2011 where 60 of us attended and Ministers responded to our demands.

Age Sector Platform continued with the Pensioners' Parliament initiative for a decade, with Age NI then taking on the mantle and organising the last Pensioners' Parliament which was held in September 2021.

Organisations and individuals contributed to that event from the Age NI Consultative Forum, from Age Sector Networks, and from former members of Age Sector Platform and the National Pensioners' Convention. It was also supported by the Commissioner for Older People.

Pensioners had a strong voice through the Pensioners' Parliament.

We hopefully made our mark and showed that pensioners are people who should be listened to.

We have always enjoyed our engagements with politicians. One MLA was what you could call one of our first victims! He sat on a platform for MLAs and we asked them questions. No-one had prior knowledge of what the questions were. When it was over he said it was like being in the Lion's Den! He remarked that it was one of the toughest question sessions he had ever experienced.

Over the years we covered many important issues affecting older people, and a lot of them are the same issues we need action on today. Would you believe that at the very first Pensioners Parliament 13 years ago, one of the motions debated was about a cut to Winter Fuel Payments? Isn't it sad that this issue is back on our agenda today?

The issues covered at the last Pensioners' Parliament in 2021 will also sound familiar today: reform of adult social care, access to health and care services, transport and getting around, equality legislation for older people, sustaining the community age sector, staying connected and much more.

In recent years older people have proven that we can change things when we stand up and have our voices heard. The proposal to take the SmartPass away from 60-64 year olds was met with great opposition. People gathered on the street and here at Stormont to protest. We argued that older people, and society in general, need this scheme. Without free transport many older people couldn't get out and might become housebound. The health consequences of this would put more pressure on the NHS.

We won that argument and have that proposal has now been

scrapped. Let's see what we can continue to achieve together today and into the future.

## Equal Access to Appropriate Healthcare and Services

by Ivan Baxter



Mr Deputy Speaker. My name is Ivan Baxter, I am 84 years of age and I am a member of the Belfast East Seniors Forum and the Greater Belfast Seniors Forum. I have been asked to address the Assembly on the subject of equal access to appropriate Healthcare and Services. This is a vast subject Mr Deputy Speaker, so, in the time available I will only touch on three areas and very superficially at that.

In our Forums, when the draft programme for Government was published we held discussions about the matters that affected folk most. Top of the list was trying to get a doctor's appointment at GP Surgeries. Ringing the doctor's surgery early in the morning and then finding all the slots are already taken is very stressful for older people. And if they do get through eventually only to find they are 25th in the queue that is almost as bad.

If they are fortunate enough to get speaking to a receptionist the usual response is that the doctor will ring back some time during the day. Waiting for the doctor's call is also stressful, what happens if I miss the call? Younger folk can deal with these situations much better than elderly people, and indeed it is rumoured that if they can't get a doctor's appointment then they go to the Emergency Department in the nearest hospital thus adding to the queue there. And so we believe that a much easier and simpler way to make doctors' appointments should be devised which would make life easier for older people.

Secondly we hear so often that getting discharged from hospital can be very stressful for older people. In many cases there is a need for a care package to be put in place before discharge. This can sometimes take weeks. In the meantime the older person is bed blocking or they are transferred temporarily to a less acute hospital to wait, and this can be a long way from home. There is therefore an apparent need for much more efficient arrangements for hospital discharge which causes as little stress to the older patient as possible.

Thirdly I would like to raise the issue of age discrimination in the provision of health care. The covid pandemic had a disproportionate affect on older people. In the first wave 90% of the deaths were in older people and the hospitals were finding it almost impossible to cope. A suggestion was made that perhaps folk over a certain age, say 70, should not be admitted to hospital since their chances of recovery were poor and they were taking up a place in the hospital which could be given to a younger person with a better chance of survival. This course of action would have been unlawful in Great Britain but not Northern Ireland. Here there is no law preventing Age Discrimination in goods, facilities and services. This legislation is very badly needed here to ensure that such a horrific scenario never takes place.

The Department of Health's plans to cope with its budget will have a catastrophic affect on older people. 10 of 11 of the cost saving measures affect older people, while five of them directly target older people. These are;

1. Reducing support of the community voluntary sector's health promotion, which so many older people depend upon for information and other services.
2. Reducing vaccinations – how does this make sense when older people are being told by the same health service to top up our winter and covid vaccinations?
3. Reducing domiciliary health care – a huge proportion of the beneficiaries are older people.
4. Reducing the number of acute care beds – again, heavily used by older people, and which also makes no

sense with planned reductions in domiciliary care.

5. Reduction in care home beds – another blow to older people. The plans are shambolic and directly target the older population. They will result in more older people turning up as more expensive cases further down the care system.

Mr. Speaker there are many other issues relating to older people in this very wide area of Healthcare and Services and I would urge the Executive to revisit the draft Programme for Government in the light of an expanding ageing population.

## Healthcare Intervention

by David Jamison



Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to commend our health workers. They are working incredibly hard within very demanding circumstances.

Through our older people's forums, our networks and word of mouth, I am aware of the excellent care received once an older person gets to the point of treatment. Nurses are dedicated, doctors are thorough, hospital staff and cleaners are highly professional. These people are a credit to our health service. We should be valuing our health workers.

But getting to the point of treatment is nightmare-ish for older people. Waiting lists are beyond ridiculous. The healthcare system in Northern Ireland is forcing older people towards private care and we can't afford it.

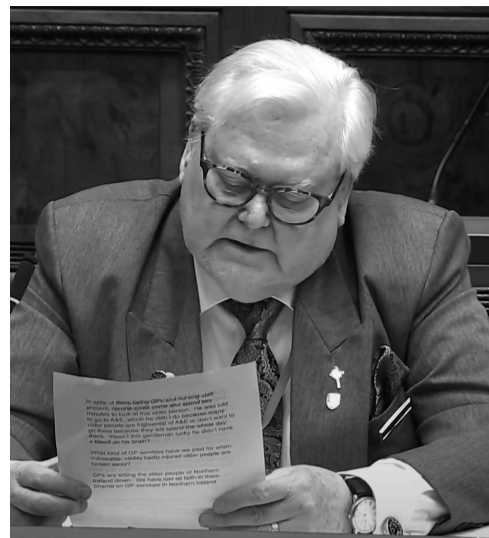
How can we afford monthly health care insurance when we are already struggling to heat our homes and feed ourselves? We aren't earning any more and have no extra money. This year we have less money now the winter fuel allowance has been taken away.

We have already paid our taxes and national insurance throughout our lives, so why are the very services we have paid for not available to us now we are starting to need them more?

If there were fewer managers in the health system and more health workers that would be a start. We have paid our way, now give us the health care we are morally entitled to.

## Healthcare Intervention

by Godfrey Brock-Gadd



Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a true story.

This happened at a GP surgery in North Down/ Ards this year.

An older man in his early 80s had a fall one evening at home, a black out. He fell onto his face, came around and had hit his face very badly. The next day the whole of the top half of his face, from his upper lip upwards, was purple with bruising.

He went to his local GP practice the following morning. He was clearly visibly badly injured, an unwitnessed fall with head injuries, with possibilities of internal injuries.

He was turned away by the people working at reception and told to phone back the following day at 8.30am. This is a GP practice that routinely has no emergency appointments left within minutes of the 8.30am phone lines opening.

In spite of there being GPs and nursing staff present, no-one could come and spend two minutes to look at this older person. He was told to go to A&E, which he didn't do because many older people are frightened of A&E or don't want to go there because they will spend the whole day there. Wasn't this gentleman lucky he didn't have a bleed on his brain?

What kind of GP services have we paid for when vulnerable, visibly badly injured older people are turned away? GPs are letting the older people of Northern Ireland down. We have lost all faith in them. Shame on GP services in Northern Ireland.

## Transport and Travel

by Norma Jeffers



My name is Norma Jeffers and I'm representing the older people who responded to the consultation for the Older People's Parliament via "Agenda" known as Age North Down and Ards. This is charity whose purpose is to support and to encourage all older people to live well, become active, engaged, and influential members of the community. Ards and North Down had the highest return to the consultation, and the topic of transport and travel was identified as a top priority.

For context, according to statistics published by NISRA from the 2021 census for Northern Ireland, the population increase from 2011 - 2021 was greatest in the older age groups. Those aged 65 or more increased by 24 percent, in other words over 60,000 persons. The largest increase was in Ards and North Down from 17.7% to 22.1%, and the area covers sizeable urban and rural demographic.

Firstly, I would like to discuss the positives identified via the consultation. There are already some excellent initiatives and services already in place. Pedestrianised areas were valued and should be increased. The Motability, Shop Mobility, Mobility Scooters, and Blue Badge schemes were again highly valued. Free travel for older people in the form of the "SmartPass" should continue in its current form. Airport priority boarding, air ambulance, hospital transport and community transport schemes were all acknowledged positively by all respondents.

There are however gaps and challenges and it's these I would like to highlight today.

First of all, I want to acknowledge and welcome the new Belfast Grand Central Station and all its anticipated benefits. There are, however, other gaps. For example connectivity improvements, and these need to be extended to rural areas such as hubs. And at a practical level there's a lack of well covered and seated bus shelters, and there is also a gap with access and egress to bus stops. There's no point having the bus stops if you are risking life and limb to reach them.

The respondents also talked about accessible, affordable and user-friendly public car parking facilities and travel to our now not so local bank branches in order to maintain financial independence and management.

There's an impact to these transport challenges, for example access to everyday activities such as health appointments, banks, shops, meeting family and friends, and social activities. All of the things we take for granted and have an impact on our social interventions since isolation mental health and wellbeing. Recommendations from respondents.

A very practical thing is information on what is available in a local area and Northern Ireland as a whole. We need ease of access to appropriate benefits to assist in transport costs. And we are calling for the establishment of the older people's parliament to continuously highlight, monitor and review progress on these issues. There also needs to be the implementation of an accessible transport strategy for older people, and there should be continuous consultation and engagement with those who plan transport policy and services, ensuring that older people have a valued voice.

In completion thank you for the opportunity to address the Older Peoples Parliament today. We believe the issues highlighted will lead to improvement to travel and transport for future generations and ensure accessibility fairness and equality to all.

### Transport and Travel Intervention

by Adrienne Brown



Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I am Adrienne Brown and I rise to highlight the need to implement a loneliness strategy in Northern Ireland such as already exists in Scotland and in Wales. The negative effect of prolonged loneliness, especially upon the older people, is regarded by health professionals as a public health issue. I commend the excellent services provided by Age North Down and Ards, known as AgeNDA, in supporting isolated elderly people. But I believe that a loneliness strategy, which all parties supported in principle here in the Assembly on the 29th of April this year, should now be created and rolled out, and mainstreamed across all relevant government departments, without delay, and recognised in their forward planning.

### Education and Work

by Marion Cinnamond



Good afternoon. My name is Marian Cinnamond and I am here to speak about Older People in relation to Education and Work.

I first retired from full-time work in 2014 when I was 61. What I experienced, in common with a lot of older people, was living in a world that was getting smaller. I no longer had regular colleagues. Over the next few years several of my close friends became ill and died - sadly a common experience in ageing. My eyesight started to deteriorate.

This scenario of living in a shrinking world is common to a lot of older people who can begin to feel lonely, unwanted and that they have nothing to offer in life. I am going to focus on two areas that can help older people to make a positive contribution to society - Education and Work.

There is no shortage of evidence to show that learning new things is beneficial to older people. As neurons in the brain die, new neurons can be formed to compensate for the loss. This is alongside the obvious benefits of the joy of learning new things, the social aspects of being part of a class and a sense of achievement that can be gained. The brain is a muscle that needs exercise to keep healthy, just like any other. The motivation to keep on learning may be different. There may be less emphasis on career development for example.

Mister Deputy Speaker, the provision of learning for older people at a local level through organisations such as U3A is to be welcomed and celebrated. They are doing amazing work and I am proud to have recently joined them. I have also benefitted for many years from concessionary fees for courses at Queen's University and the Crescent Arts Centre. Concessionary fees, however, does not necessarily mean affordable on a tight budget and at times I have had to refrain from signing up for classes on cost grounds. Many older people depend on public transport and some are not comfortable to go out at night.

I also want to mention access to Higher Education for older people. For some people this may be the first opportunity to consider a University education and for others, myself included, it may be the time that they can consider taking on that course that they want to do just because they are interested. Support with fees for full-time Higher Education courses is not available for people over the age of sixty. Happily there is support available for part-time H.E. courses, but only if at a higher level than the applicant has already obtained.

In short, I would ask the Assembly to maintain awareness of the health and societal benefits of providing educational opportunities for older people at a range of levels, at a cost they can afford, at times they feel comfortable leaving their homes, and

in locations they can access, wherever they live.

Moving on to the topic of older people and work, I personally still work part-time. Like a lot of people whose income is just above eligibility for pension credit, it keeps me from poverty and I dread the day when I will no longer be able to supplement my income in this way.

With the raising of the state retirement age more and more older people are having to work for longer whether they want to or not. Older people can bring a lifetime of knowledge and experience to the work environment. But in order to contribute to the workplace in a meaningful and satisfying way, some older people may need the right conditions and support to be in place. Age NI has researched this topic, and their Age at Work programme aims to address some of the issues older workers experience and provide meaningful support. Many older people have declining levels of energy or other health needs which may limit the roles they can undertake. It would be a great loss to society if employers were unable to benefit from their knowledge and experience because they were not willing or able to accommodate an older person's particular needs.

Older people are as varied as any other age group. Some may want to work full-time for as long as possible. Since retiring I have taken on freelance and part-time work and I can only work in the role that I do now because of the benefits of a zero hours contract and the right to say no when I need to. If zero-hour contracts are done away with, I will have to find some other way to cope financially.

Other people may want to start or continue to run their own business.

My own experience is that older age can be joyous and fulfilling - because I am lucky enough to remain active and involved in a range of activities. It is important that in carrying out the programme for Government the Assembly maintains an awareness of the support needs of older people in relation to Education and Work to foster a happier, healthier and well-connected generation.

### Intervention on Education and Work

by Wilma Stewart



Good afternoon. My name is Wilma Stewart and I am Co-Vice Chair of Age NI's Consultative Forum.

One of the pieces of work I became involved in was representing Older People on the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group. A Position paper giving the Groups recommendations on the development of an Anti Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland was submitted.

A number of calls were made by Age NI. One of them being Support Measures for older people of working age. No older person should be in poverty. A person's financial position upon retirement is linked to circumstances over a lifetime, their employment history, earning levels and time out of the labour market.

Only too evident is the experience of the WASPI women who are fighting for redress against the increase in pension age imposed upon them with little warning.

Recommendations include:

The Strategy should consider the implications of an ageing workforce in Northern Ireland. There should be flexibility and support for changes in roles, and support to gain skills across the age range.

Data on working age should be collated and reported on to reflect rising State Pension Age.

Mr Deputy Speaker, MLA's I ask that the Northern Ireland Executive ensure addressing poverty in later life is identified as a priority in the Programme for Government.

### Loneliness and Isolation

by Valerie Cobain



I am the U3A trustee for Northern Ireland, and my contribution will focus on loneliness and isolation. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address a topic that touches the lives of many but is often left in the shadows.

As people enter their golden years after decades of hard work and dedication, society paints a picture of leisure and relaxation, but, for many, the reality is far from idyllic. Instead of peace, they often find themselves confronted with a quiet void, feeling disconnected and invisible.





While loneliness is a universal human experience, it can be especially acute for those who are older. The reasons are many.

Retirement often means leaving behind the structure of a career, the companionship of colleagues and the daily routine that gives life meaning. Friendships forged over years of work can drift apart, and we no longer see each other. As the days stretch on, it is easy for a sense of purpose to erode. Once central to the functioning of an organisation or community, older people can feel that they are now simply on the sidelines and no longer needed or valued. That isolation is further compounded by the inevitable changes that come with ageing.

Health issues may make it more difficult to engage in social activities, and some people become housebound. With limited mobility comes limited opportunities to see friends or participate in community events.

Tragically, many face the loss of loved ones, be they a spouse, family members or lifelong friends. Such losses not only create emotional pain but leave a gap in the social networks that older people depend on for companionship and support.

It is particularly alarming that loneliness is not just an emotional state. It is a serious public health concern. Studies have shown that chronic loneliness can lead to a higher risk of physical and mental health problems, including heart disease, depression and cognitive decline. That paints a stark picture of how profound loneliness can affect the quality of life.

What can we do? As individuals and as a society, we must work to

address this growing issue. First, we must encourage connection. Getting older does not mean stepping away from life but stepping into a new chapter.

Specifically designed social programmes, community centres and volunteer opportunities can offer meaningful engagement. Such initiatives allow individuals to continue contributing to their skills and knowledge, keeping them mentally active and socially connected. Secondly, we need to leverage technology as a tool to combat isolation. For those who are unable to leave their home, technology offers a vital lifeline. Video calls, social media and lifelong communities can help older people to stay in touch with family, friends and new acquaintances. While technology can never replace face-to-face interaction, it can be a powerful supplement to help maintain social bonds.

Lastly, we must nurture a culture of inclusion. Families and communities should make a conscious effort to reach out to their older members, involving them in activities and ensuring that they feel valued and heard.

Simple gestures: a phone call, a visit, an invitation to join a family gathering can make a world of difference. Loneliness and isolation are not inevitable. With awareness, understanding and action, we can ensure that older age is not a time for solitude but one for continued connection, fulfilment and joy. By addressing these challenges head-on, we can build a society where no one, regardless of age, has to face the quiet pain of loneliness alone.

## Poverty

by Ivan Baxter



My name is Ivan Baxter, and I repeat that I am 84 years of age and I am a member of the Belfast East Seniors' Forum and the Greater Belfast Seniors' Forum. I have been asked to speak to you about poverty amongst older people in Northern Ireland. Most of the statistics in my address are from government publications and can be easily verified although I have used rounding for convenience.

In Northern Ireland about one fifth of the population can be classified as older. This proportion of the population is growing and will reach about a quarter in twenty year's time. Of the present older population about one quarter are living in poverty, according to the latest figures from the Department of Communities; this works out at 58,000 pensioners, not exactly something to be proud of.

How has this come about? To begin

with pensioners have suffered a number of "hits" in comparatively recent years beginning with the withdrawal of the free tv licence. Then the pension age was increased to save money. Now it is proposed to withdraw the winter fuel payments to all but the most needy. But the underlying cause is none of these, it is the fact that the UK pension is amongst the stingiest in the Western world. In a league table covering most European countries if Britain was a football team it would be relegated. This is State imposed poverty!

Rising living and energy costs have made older people increasingly fearful and anxious. Many are living on damp, cold homes, washing in cold water and afraid to use the cooker because of the price of electricity. Since Covid three times as many pensioners are using Food Banks than before and this will probably increase. Older folk, already vulnerable, will most certainly succumb to both stress and cold related illnesses putting great pressure on already overwhelmed health and social services. The Government's aim to save money through their draconian treatment of older people will simply go up in smoke.

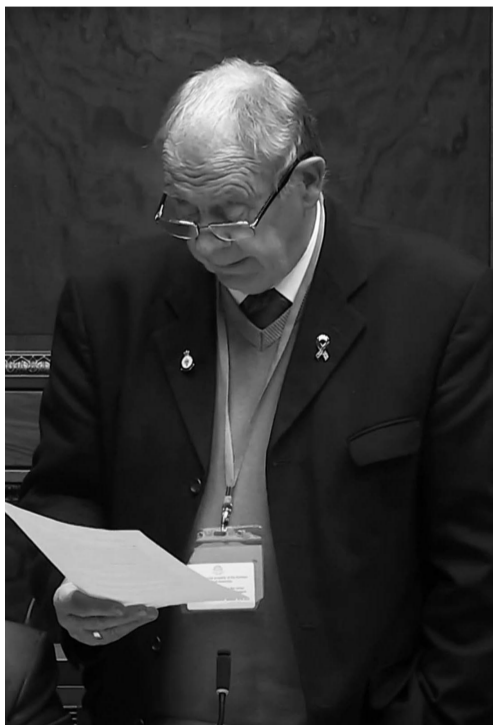
So what can be done to mitigate the situation? In an ideal world the restoration of the free tv licence and the cancellation of the withdrawal of the winter fuel payments would be a help. In addition the linking of the lowest tax threshold to the triple lock would be useful. But most of all raising the Basic State Pension (which the vast majority of pensioners receive) to the same level as the New State Pension would solve a lot of problems. But there is no political will to take any of these measures.

Pensioner poverty is a devolved issue. So, is there anything that could be done locally by our Executive to help older people. Well, the Department of Communities estimate that with regard to Pension Credit £1.1 MILLION per WEEK is not being claimed. Round about 26,000 older people could be entitled if they claimed. Therefore the Department needs to mount a vigorous campaign to improve the take up of this benefit substantially. Secondly The Lone Pensioner Allowance which provides a 20% discount to folk living alone could be increased to 30% giving a bit more breathing space to lonely pensioners. Thirdly the Executive could seek the extension of the GB Warm Home Discount Scheme to Northern Ireland. This scheme provides a £150 per annum discount on fuel bills to needy pensioners at no cost to the Treasury. These measures will not entirely eliminate poverty but isn't it better to do something than nothing. As I said earlier older people are in the process of forming a greater proportion of the population and I would urge the Executive to re-think the draft programme for Government which hardly mentions Older People and to set about creating a Strategy for an Ageing population covering all aspects of life.

One of our colleagues is prone to use the phrase "Our today is your tomorrow". Wouldn't it be a very good thing if your tomorrow was better than our today, though I doubt if I will ever find out.

### Intervention on Poverty

by Tommy Hinds



Mr Deputy Speaker, rising levels of poverty amongst elderly is a real issue for my generation and we fear for the future generations of people coming into a retirement age. We feel cheated on and neglected, when the return for years of hard work and paying taxes and public contributions is that our pension seems to be increasingly shrinking and benefits like the Winter Fuels Payment are being removed.

This will have real and dramatic consequences for the people over 60- having to chose between heating the home or eating nutritious meal, worsening of physical and mental health, loneliness and feeling of despair. From talking to friends and neighbours we are hearing of people only being able to heat one room in their house, not being able to have a warm meal, because they are afraid to use the gas, people who would spend their days in public buildings or on public transport like the Glider because they are warmer than their houses.

We are hearing of people isolating themselves, ashamed they are not being able to look after themselves properly, because of having to chose between the necessities. Our dignity and independence gets stripped away. My peers feel overlooked and left to their own devices, most of us are no longer active members of the workforce, therefore we seem to be expendable.

We would urge the Government to look at the sustainable ways of making lives of the older generation easier and more dignified.

### Intervention on Poverty

by Joan Hayes



Who is going to pay for old age in the future so that older people are not living in poverty?

I paid my taxes and national insurance, but now, how is the cost of the ageing society going to be covered?

The number of older people is increasing, while the number of people of working age and paying tax is decreasing.

In 2017 for every older person of pension age there were five people of working age. Now, it's four people of working age. By 2040 it is predicted to be 3 people of working age, and by 2070 it is predicted there will be around 2 people of working age for every pensioner.

Meanwhile the cost of the ageing society is increasing - increased numbers on state pension, increased

housing costs, increased healthcare.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has no strategy for coping with an ageing population. The Executive is sleep-walking into an economic tsunami of the same size as the crisis in health care, child care, and the environment.

The Programme for Government needs a tenth priority to strategically plan properly for the impact of an ageing population.

### The Digital Divide: Bridging the Gap for Older Adults

by David Jamison



Introduction: Older adults are increasingly embracing technology, but they often face unique challenges in navigating the digital world. These challenges can lead to social isolation, limited access to information, and economic disadvantage. This talk will explore some of the specific issues facing older adults in the digital age and discuss strategies for bridging the digital divide.

#### Accessibility: A Major Hurdle

Many websites and applications are not designed with older adults in mind, making them difficult to use. Small fonts, complex navigation, and lack of contrast can pose significant challenges for individuals with age-related vision impairments. Additionally, older adults may struggle with touchscreens and other modern technologies that require fine motor skills. Additionally as time goes on printed schedules and documents older people previously relied on are disappearing.

Digital Literacy: A Growing Need Older adults may have limited experience with computers and smartphones, making it difficult for them to learn new technologies. This lack of digital literacy can hinder their ability to access online services and resources, communicate with loved ones, and participate in online activities. Meanwhile the bank branches and other services are rapidly closing, reducing opportunities for those who have difficulty navigating online platforms.

#### Social Isolation: A Digital Divide

The digital divide can contribute to social isolation among older adults. As younger generations become increasingly reliant on technology for social interaction, older adults who are unable to use digital tools are feeling disconnected and excluded.

Economic Disadvantage - A Digital Divide: The inability to use digital technologies can have economic consequences for older adults.

Online banking, job applications, and government services often require digital skills, and those who are unable to access these resources may face financial hardship. Meanwhile it is reported that millions of pounds go unclaimed with people having difficulty going online to apply for benefits and then losing interest in finding other ways to submit claims. Protecting Against Scams: Scams are by far the biggest concern for older people. It's essential for older adults to be aware of the risks of online scams and take steps to protect themselves. This includes being skeptical of unsolicited calls, emails, or texts, especially those asking for personal information or financial assistance. Additionally, older adults should avoid clicking on suspicious links or downloading attachments from unknown sources or responding to fake advertising on Social media platforms

To put this in context In the last 13 months, there were 5,412 reports of fraud made to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with reported total losses of approximately £23.1 million.

Bridging the Digital Divide: In summary to address the unique challenges faced by older adults in the digital age, it is essential we:

- Promote inclusive design: Ensure that websites and applications are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.
- Offer digital literacy training: Provide tailored training programs to help older adults and others develop the skills they need to use technology effectively.
- Support digital inclusion initiatives: Encourage programs that provide older adults and others with access to computers, smartphones, and internet connectivity.
- Advocate for policies that address the digital divide: Support policies that promote digital equity and ensure that everyone has equal access to technology. "Digital first" should not equal "Digital only" when designing services to be primarily accessed on line.

By addressing these issues, we can help everyone bridge the digital divide and enjoy the benefits of technology, while minimizing their risk of falling behind or falling victim to scams.

## Scams and IT Intervention I

by Godfrey Brock-Gadd

Mr. Deputy Speaker, technology and computers can indeed improve some aspects of life. I use email, the internet, and my wife uses Facebook to be in contact with her daughter who lives overseas.

But there are aspects of technology that are not in favour of older people.

My bank branch closed for renovation recently so I had to bank online, which was okay. But some of my friends don't have computers and live in villages where bank branches and post offices have closed. They don't want to travel into town as town is inconvenient and difficult. The shift away from people is a major challenge.

Increasingly I find it impossible to get to speak to a human. This is inconvenient when dealing with my electricity bill, but very concerning when I'm trying to get results of medical tests. Recently it took me weeks to get some results.

Scams are a constant concern. I get phone calls and text messages, and recently had one saying I have a parcel waiting delivery but that I needed to pay a fee to get it. Older people are increasingly the target of these scams.

As the future becomes more digital, the NI assembly has to do more to protect older people from the more remote side of technology and from the very real risk of scams.

Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker.

## Intervention on Digital Exclusion and Scams

by Ruth Girvan



Mr Deputy Speaker, my colleagues highlighted many issues in regards to the difficulties of navigating the modern, digital world. This is all very challenging to my peers.

The cost of the broadband can be a real problem. If you are struggling to feed or heat yourself how can you afford to pay for broadband? If you are just above the pension credit threshold you lose out on all the broadband deals.

While we cannot stop progress, we still need to be able to conduct our affairs and have access to services face to face. Places like bank branches need to stay open and allow for more time and flexibility over the counter. Websites should never replace printed timetables for those who need them. Older people often give up because they can't remember all of the passwords, it's often too much.

And scammers are directly targeting older people. Lonely older people are sitting ducks for scam callers. And I am aware of many older people panicked into falling for scams through automated phone messages saying their bank account has been emptied.

The Executive needs to put in place measures at a devolved level to support older people who experience the more challenging aspects and harms of technology. Not all of us have family members who can help.

## Housing Needs

by James Frizzell



Mr Deputy Speaker, my name is James Frizzell and I am privileged to be here today with Building Communities Resource Centre in Ballymoney.

A warm, comfortable, safe and accessible home is a necessity for every older person. Demand for social housing is at a record high whilst capacity is decreasing. There is a shortage of older people's accommodation across NI. The profile of social housing is determined by the needs of an ageing population, this requires accommodating more people with mobility, hearing and/or visual restrictions.

Effectively housing an ageing population is a concern for elderly people as evidenced by the consultation ahead of today. Some older people are living in homes that are not suitable for their needs but have limited options to find more appropriate housing. Lack of adaptations for those with mobility difficulties, high cost of home repairs, and limited availability of assisted facilities in the area are issues.

There have been researches and reports written about Housing for Older People, there have been developments, but why 10 years on are we still asking the same questions and examining the same policies and strategies with no clear action.

Evidence highlights the impact that housing has on a person, including their health, due to factors such as heating and dampness, their financial capacity to repair and maintain the house and inability to use part of the house because of factors such as disability and mobility.

There are issues with regard to older people who are living in privately owned or rented housing, where the support from statutory bodies is unavailable. When I lived alone and fell down the stairs twice, it wasn't an option for me to have adaptations and support to remain in my own home.

We need to consider the impact of rural and urban issues on housing for older people, I have been talking to older people who feel that they are now in forgotten villages.

This Parliament needs to recognise that the quality of accommodation in which a person lives is fundamental to quality of life. We call for Parliament to understand and acknowledge the accommodation needs, preferences and expectations of older people.

Mr Deputy Speaker we need to ensure that services, policies, initiatives and activities meet the needs of our ageing population. We call for the provision of available and accessible housing options.

We need options, capacity and availability to accommodate older people being discharged from hospital with appropriate support and care packages. Enabling older people to remain in their own homes as long as is viable and they wish it, is core to personal independence. There should be interconnectedness between housing and health with reference to the way in which older people are supported to remain living at home. We need a stronger commitment to safeguarding older people in residential care homes, when this is the only remaining option left for some who have been left with no alternatives.

We need to take steps to address these challenges, policy and strategy needs to identify measurable outcomes that can be achieved and are held to account.

Mr Deputy Speaker we need to build examples of innovative, appropriate housing options in villages and towns. This approach needs to be regional and encompass the Statutory and Community sectors to ensure a wider impact. When developing housing options for older people, we would appreciate consideration of the following:

- Quality of life
- Health and well being
- Isolation & Loneliness
- Actual space and design
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Positive model of ageing

We need to be able to offer advice and engage older people in benefits checks. We need to raise awareness of support and alternatives available to older people. Information and advice needs to be available in varying formats to engage with the ageing population, and not limited to online channels. There could be additional funding provided within the voluntary and community sector to support this.

We need to ensure that throughout the development, design and implementation of strategies, that we have full participation of older people with lived experiences who can help shape, inform and improve services. This should be supported by a range of community-based initiatives that promote inclusion and participation. Mr Deputy Speaker we have a real opportunity to effect change and support older people in a tangible and meaningful way.

## Housing Intervention

by Jillian McIntyre



In support of the Member's statement, I would like to highlight the importance of considering the rural aspect of housing. People who have lived a rural life often find it upsetting and distressing to move into a town. We need to take into account those who want the peace of the countryside. Let us be mindful of where people have lived their lives. We need social and sheltered housing and care homes on the outskirts of towns. To support that, could family members fill some of the gaps in the shortage of carers? We need a policy similar to maternity leave for people who want to care for a loved one who lives in social housing or with their family.

Support would be needed from employers and a structure put in place that is agreed at government level. We can support our older family members with flexibility, support and training.



## Housing Intervention

by Marbeth Hedley



In support of the Member's statement, I would like to highlight the importance of having care packages in place to enable older people to be discharged from hospital. There are too many cases where older people have had to stay for longer periods in hospital — bed-blocking — due to a lack of plans in place to support the transition home.

I have personal experience of a 98-year-old gentleman, who had a minor fall at home and had been in hospital for a very short time, being moved to care accommodation at 11.45 pm. That initiated an upsetting phone call from the hospital to his next of kin — another elderly person — in the middle of the night. People have had to be misplaced into temporary supported accommodation until packages are put in place. That impacts on their rehabilitation and recovery and deteriorates their mental health. Thank you for taking my intervention.

## Older People's Rights

by Anne Watson



Pensioners do not expect preferential treatment but neither do we want discrimination. When we were young we were told work hard, pay your National Insurance and taxes until you're 60-65 and you will reap the benefits when you're older. We had covid, we got over that. The

new Labour government came along with great promises but found a black hole with debt of billions that apparently no one else knew anything about.

They had to fill this black hole and needed money so who do they take it from first? They decide to cut the winter fuel payment taking up to £300 from us, with no proper discussion about it.

Pensioners need this money to keep the heating on. When you consider rising fuel costs and the loss of other cost of living payments, many pensioners are facing a shortfall of hundreds from the money we budget for the year. What next? Are we back to heat or eat? Pensioners looking at a bleak future.

If you do not have heat you get sick. If you do not have food you get sick. So these cuts will have an impact on a health service that is already on the brink of falling apart. 262,000 older people might need additional health treatment if winter fuel goes through, at a cost of £169 million. So much for filling the black hole.

On top of cuts to our essential living expenses, the Department of Health has just released a draft budget that by its own admission will have adverse impacts on older people as an equality group. Cuts to staffing, cuts to in-patient beds, cuts to residential care home places, cuts to domiciliary care that will mean over 1 MILLION fewer hours of domiciliary care delivered.

These decisions leave us feeling like we don't matter and our needs are not a priority to government. Older people's rights are under threat — our right to live healthy dignified lives, to have our independence and to have equal access to the services we depend on.

Where is the commitment to older people's rights? We are not seeing evidence that older people's rights will be protected in the Programme for Government.

It is particularly upsetting that this Programme for Government has left out the issue of age discrimination which had previously been included in 2011 and again in the New Decade New Approach Agreement of 2020.

Now we have a new Programme for Government draft that does not make any commitment to bring forward a law against age discrimination when accessing goods, facilities and services.

How much longer must we wait for the NI Executive to follow through on a commitment that it made 14 years ago?

Older people are at risk of discrimination in many areas of our day to day lives. Research has shown that we can experience age discrimination when accessing health services like cancer treatments, surgery or mental health therapies. Age NI's Lived Experience report for

2023 revealed that 79% of older people think equal access to healthcare is absolutely essential. This was the top issue for the older people surveyed.

Some survey participants reported that they felt 'sidelined', 'forgotten about', 'dismissed' and 'no longer important' to the health service. Some said that they felt they 'were not encouraged to seek treatment' and that the pain they experienced was 'not treated seriously'. Others said that staff could be condescending in their attitude, not give an older person the time they needed to make a decision or made assumptions that an older person did not have capacity to make a decision about their treatment and care.

The Commissioner for Older People published a report on ageism this year that showed 49% of us have experienced ageist attitudes and behaviour. One way this can affect us is digital exclusion when service providers are not willing to provide non-digital ways to access the services we need.

When it comes to financial services like insurance and mortgages, older people can be shut out of the market or have our age used as justification for charging extortionate premiums.

So Mr Deputy Speaker, I put it to this house that older people need better protection of our rights. We need strong laws against age discrimination. We need government to invest in the services and financial support that will allow us all to live well in later life. One in six people are now aged 65 and over. By 2040 it will be one in three people. The Executive should take action now to protect the rights of such a large proportion of the population.

## Intervention on Rights of Older People

by Ann Murray



Would the Member agree that older people in Northern Ireland are now in a much worse position than our counterparts in the UK and Ireland?

Recently Age NI submitted evidence to an inquiry by the Committee for the Executive Office into gaps in equality law. This evidence focused on the disparity in age discrimination

protections across these islands.

In Great Britain, age discrimination in the delivery of goods, facilities and services has been prohibited since 2012. This was when the Age Regulations were added to the Equality Act.

In Ireland, age discrimination protections were included when the Equal Status Acts were established in the year 2000, and also cover goods, facilities and services.

I put it to the Member that it is not acceptable for us in Northern Ireland to have weaker protection of our rights due to the failure of the Executive to bring forward legislation. Thank you.

## Older People's Rights Intervention

by George Bell



Thank you Deputy Speaker, I am George Bell. I want to try to aim at some examples that a lot of people here might relate to. One sore point for many of us is the additional, hidden costs and restrictive charges, particularly when purchasing holiday essentials, such as travel insurance and car hire. That was highlighted in a "Which?" report around two years ago. Older people have long been charged higher premiums for their travel insurance.

Now, we recognise that advancing age is a risk factor that can push up prices. However, "Which?" obtained figures from moneysupermarket.com, showing that, since the pandemic, the amount that older travellers are paying has risen disproportionately when compared to that which is paid by other groups. Which? also found and reinforced many of the points that have been made here that there is evidence that older travellers are being penalised due to digital exclusion by airlines. Most airlines charge customers much more to amend a booking by phone or at check-in at airports. Therefore, without legal protection, older people in Northern Ireland will continue to face direct and indirect discrimination in goods and financial services, which is both shameful and unacceptable.

## The Value of Older People to the Economy and Community Life

by the Retired Workers Committee of ICTU.

*This speech was prepared but not delivered at the Older People's Parliament, but is published here to reflect important views on the value of older people to the economy in Northern Ireland.*

Good afternoon, Mr Deputy Speaker, Members of the Assembly and fellow participants. I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak on the Value of Older People to the Economy and Community Life.

I am going to concentrate on the second part of the title – that is the contribution that older people make to Community Life.

I myself am a retired school teacher and have the privilege to live in Broughshane and I am going to highlight the valuable contribution which older people make to our community both within the village and wider area.

Broughshane is well known for its prize-winning efforts with the Best Kept awards, the Ireland's Tidy Towns competition and in 2108 won the accolade of Channel 4s UK's village of the year.

Beginning with this latter award I want to point out, and some you may remember if you watched the programmes, that there were three ladies, the three Bettys, whose contribution to the environmental work within the village was

highlighted. All three were pensioners at the time of the award. The environmental work, of course continues, and the two main workers are both above retirement age.

We have a thriving Senior Citizens Lunch Club which is operated and run by a dedicated group of retired folk and serves some 30 meals on a weekly basis and provides an afternoon's company and entertainment.

About 10 years ago we set up the Braid Oil Club – a co-operative community buying group which has overseen the delivery in around 1.5 million litres of oil at a reduced cost to its members. This is also organised by a senior citizen.

Lastly but by no means least the Community Association has some 36 member groups many but not all having officer teams which are comprised of retired members within our community.

In short, Mr Speaker, the contribution of older people to the thriving community that is Broughshane is hugely important and enables us as a community to serve the interests of all our residents.

### Intervention on the Contribution of Older People to Society in Northern Ireland

by Margaret Galloway Chair Retired Workers Committee NIC ICTU

Older people put much more into society than they take out, both economically and socially. This was

the conclusion of a report published by the previous COP (NI), Caire Keating in 2014; the figures for 2011, £49.9 billion financial and £67 billion other contributions minus £92.2 billion costs leaves £24.7 billion total net contributions made by older people. The total economic value in 2012 was almost £14 billion and over the next 50 years is expected to rise to just over £67 billion.

Older unpaid carers play a key role in enabling loved ones or friends to live dignified lives at home saving the health service millions. The economic value of the contribution made by older people in Northern Ireland through childcare in 2012 was £89 million which works out at a projected figure of £2 billion for the years 2012 to 2062.

Another way in which older people contribute is by volunteering. This is unquantified but enables them to use their skills and experience to help others in the community.

Whilst most older people do not know the figures (I didn't until I researched it for this event) they do know that they feel undervalued and forgotten. Imagine how much worse it made most of us feel to have the Universal winter fuel payment snatched from us without warning. So called wealthier pensioners some on as little as £220 per week are set to lose out.

In Northern Ireland we do not even have the advantage of the 'Warm Home Discount Scheme' which operates in England Scotland and Wales but not Northern Ireland and

gives pensioners and others on low incomes a discount of £150 per annum off their electricity bills.

Another way in which pensioners in Northern Ireland are treated differently is in the lack of protection under law, in the provision of goods, facilities and services. Pensioners' Groups have been campaigning on these issues since 2015 but to no avail. We will keep on with the fight!

We have paid tax all of our working lives and in retirement, many still do. Is this any way to treat people who have contributed much more than they have received?

### TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE OLDER PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

To watch the video of the Older People's Parliament, please log on to NI Assembly TV on Youtube on: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=I3RRYg80U68>

The transcript of the debate at the Older People's Parliament is published in Hansard, the official record of Parliaments in the UK, and can be viewed on <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/get-involved/older-peoples-parliament-2024/official-report---older-peoples-parliament-12-october-2024/>

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