

# OLDER PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT 2026

EASY READ  
HORIZON SCANNING  
REPORT



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

PREPARED BY THE NI ASSEMBLY  
RESEARCH AND INFORMATION SERVICE

MARCH 2026

# **Easy Read**

## **Older People's Parliament 2026: Horizon Scanning Report**

This document is about the Older People's Parliament (OPP) and the work that has happened since the last Parliament in October 2024.

The OPP made 33 recommendations grouped into eight themes.

In March 2026, the Assembly's Research team looked at what has happened since 2024. This is called the Horizon Scanning report.

For each theme, this Easy Read version gives you:

- Short points about what has changed
- What is still unclear and what needs more information
- Questions for the panel to consider for each theme

# Themes

Theme 1: Equal access to healthcare and services

Theme 2: Travel & Transport

Theme 3: Work & Education

Theme 4: Loneliness & Isolation

Theme 5: Poverty and Older People

Theme 6: Digital inclusion and Safety

Theme 7: Housing and Support

Theme 8: The Rights of Older People

# Theme 1: Equal access to healthcare and services

## What the Horizon Scanning shows

- New online systems (MyCare/Encompass) let people see some results, medicines and appointments. This is useful for many people, but it does not replace phone or in-person booking for those who are not online.
- The scan did not find a clear, NI-wide change that makes GP booking easier for older people (for example, all-day phone booking or a simple walk-in request system).
- Health Service improvement work (2024/25) says 11 local projects looked at hospital stay and discharge for older people. These projects were supported across Trusts as part of a quality improvement programme.
- At the time of the scan, there were no public results showing that discharge delays for older people had gone down (for example, fewer days from “ready to leave” to going home).
- An MLA is developing a Bill to stop unjustified age discrimination when using goods, facilities and services. It is not clear when the Bill will be introduced to the Assembly.
- Budget Equality Impact Assessments from the Department of Health say older people may be more badly affected by cost-savings because they use

services more often. The Assessments do not list which services for older people will be kept safe.

**The panel may wish to consider:**

- Has GP booking got easier for older people?
- Are there updates showing older people leave hospital quicker?
- When will the age-discrimination law be brought forward?
- Which health services older people use will be protected?

## **Theme 2: Travel and Transport**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- The draft Transport Strategy 2035 talks about better links for rural areas and better waiting facilities (such as shelters and seating) along key routes.
- The Strategy also mentions Park & Ride/Share to help people who live outside towns to connect with public transport for part of their journey.
- There is no separate, older-people-focused transport plan set out in the Strategy. Older people's needs are mentioned, but not as a stand-alone plan with actions and dates.
- Some shelter upgrades are moving ahead through Translink on specific corridors. There is no NI-wide list of locations, standards (for example, lighting, seating), and delivery dates.
- Help with travel costs exists (for example, SmartPass and some health-related travel help).
- The Strategy says there will be engagement when local transport plans are prepared, but it does not explain how the voices of older people will be included and reported back. There is a Committee which advises DfI on issues for older people around travel and transport.

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- Which rural routes will improve first?

- Where will new or upgraded bus shelters go next?
- Can one guide explain all the travel support older people can get?

## **Theme 3: Work and Education**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- Research shows learning in later life can support better health, confidence and social connection.
- The scan found that older people often do not know where to find local, low-cost learning (for example, at libraries, colleges or community centres).
- Costs can put people off, although full-time Further education courses are free. It is unclear what other fee help or discounts apply to older learners, and where small bursaries (for travel or equipment) are available.
- Classes are not always at safe or convenient times (for example, daylight hours). Some venues are not fully accessible (for example, step-free access, nearby parking, accessible toilets).
- The Careers Action Plan says support is for all ages. The scan did not see clear actions aimed at older workers (for example, tailored careers support for people over 50 returning to work).

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- Can there be one place to find low-cost local learning?
- What fee help is available for older learners?
- Can more daytime sessions be offered in accessible places?

## **Theme 4: Loneliness and Isolation**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- Northern Ireland does not yet have a Loneliness Strategy led by the Executive. The Wellbeing Framework in the Programme for Government measures loneliness, but a cross-government plan with actions and dates has not been published.
- Professional tools and guidance exist to help social work staff recognise loneliness and signpost people to support. These are helpful for assessment, but they are not the same as funding regular local activities that bring people together every week.
- Digital connection projects — such as Connect IT supported by Go ON NI — report positive feedback from participants (for example, feeling more confident to video-call family). These projects depend on local partners and short-term funding.

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- Will Northern Ireland get a Loneliness Strategy?
- How will local groups be supported to keep people connected?
- Can more device-loan and safe-use sessions be offered?

## Theme 5: Poverty and Older People

### What the Horizon Scanning shows

- The Department for Communities continues “Make the Call”, which helps older people check and claim Pension Credit and other benefits they may have missed. This increases income for many pensioners.
- The Lone Pensioner Allowance gives a discount on rates for those aged over 70 who live by themselves. It is currently a discount of 20%. There does not seem to have been any consideration to raising this to 30%.
- Winter Fuel Payments were restored for winter 2025/26 in Northern Ireland by new regulations, with pensioners with a taxable income over £35 000 or on certain benefits able to keep the payment.
- The GB Warm Home Discount scheme has not been extended to Northern Ireland. Public statements refer to discussions with the Executive, but there is no confirmed NI scheme in place.
- The Programme for Government does not create a separate ageing-population priority. Pressures linked to an older population are noted in wellbeing measures, but there is no stand-alone set of actions for ageing in the current plan.

**The panel may wish to consider:**

- How will more older people be helped to claim Pension Credit?
- Will consideration be given to raising Lone Pensioner Allowance to 30%?
- How will winter fuel help reach everyone who needs it?
- When will a decision be made about the Warm Home Discount?

## **Theme 6: Digital inclusion and safety**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- Departments publish accessibility statements for their websites and aim to meet standards such as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. However, the scan notes mixed levels of accessibility across sites and continuing work to fix issues.
- Go ON NI funds or supports free digital skills sessions, often delivered in libraries and community centres (for example, help with using email, video calls and online safety). Session numbers and topics vary by area.
- The Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund delivers a number of initiatives including tailored digital skills training for older people and provision of laptops to individuals and community groups to help with digital inclusion.
- The scan did not find a new policy that guarantees non-digital ways to use important public services (such as a phone line or a walk-in office) alongside online routes. This remains a concern for people who are not online.

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- Can accessibility checks on websites be improved?
- Where can people get devices or data support?
- Are non-digital ways to use services still available?

## **Theme 7: Housing and Support**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- A Northern Ireland policy for unpaid carer's leave is being developed in line with GB. The stated aim is to move towards paid leave when this is possible, but the start date and funding have not been confirmed.
- Some strategies and plans say they will engage widely, and Departments have Equality Schemes which set out how they consult people about their plans. Local practice varies.
- Public information about short-term help after hospital (for example, step-down beds, rapid response home care, equipment and home adaptations) is limited. The scan could not find a single place that lists this capacity by Trust area.
- The Department for Communities promotes eight design principles for housing for older people (for example: space for aids and adaptations; universal design; flexibility and positive ageing). These principles guide good practice but are not mandatory in all projects.

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- When will carer's leave start?
- How will older people be involved in planning?
- What short-term support is available after hospital?

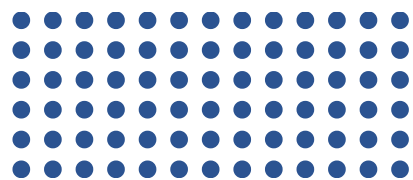
## **Theme 8: Rights of Older People**

### **What the Horizon Scanning shows**

- An MLA is developing a Bill to stop unjustified age discrimination when using goods, facilities and services. It is not clear when the Bill will be introduced to the Assembly.
- The scan did not identify a cross-government investment plan for later life. Such a plan would bring together actions for health, housing, transport and income support with timelines and measures.
- The Programme for Government 2024–27 does not include a specific commitment on the rights of older people. Instead, it tracks progress through broad wellbeing measures that cover everyone.

### **The panel may wish to consider:**

- When will the age-discrimination Bill be brought forward?
- Will there be a plan to support services for later life?
- Will the next PFG include a commitment on older people's rights?



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