



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Report on
The Older People's Parliament

12 October 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“In recent years, we older people have proven that we can change things when we stand up and have our voices heard.”

Anne Watson, Age NI

1. On 12 October 2024 the Older People’s Parliament was held in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings. Deputy Speaker John Blair MLA presided.
2. A Consultative Panel, made up of a range of groups and organisations which support and work with older people, was established in June 2024 to help shape, plan and deliver the Older People’s Parliament.
3. During the planning stages, the dates for the consultation on the Northern Ireland Executive’s draft Programme for Government (PfG) were released. The consultation dates coincided with the date the Older People’s Parliament was due to take place.
4. Therefore, the Consultative Panel agreed that the focus of the Parliament should be responding to the draft PfG. The Consultative Panel prepared and agreed a motion, calling for a range of issues of concern to older people to be included in the PfG. The Consultative Panel agreed to invite The First and deputy First Ministers to attend the Older People’s Parliament and respond to the motion.
5. **The agreed motion for the Older People’s Parliament was:**

“That this 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 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 that will meet the needs of all older people.”
6. During the planning stages, a public survey was published to enable the wider public to identify issues for inclusion in the Parliament. Almost 1,700 responses were received, mainly from older people. Based on the concerns outlined by the respondents to the survey, eight key issues were identified.
7. Each of the organisations represented on the Consultative Panel selected one of the eight issues to focus on during the Parliament. The organisations then

selected a member of their respective network to deliver a speech on the chosen issue, as well as other participants to make interventions.

8. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister were unavailable to respond to the motion during proceedings in the Assembly Chamber. However, the following Ministers and MLAs attended a roundtable discussion event which took place immediately prior to the Older People's Parliament:

- Deputy Speaker, John Blair MLA,
- deputy First Minister, Emma Little Pengelly MLA,
- Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt MLA,
- Brian Kingston MLA,
- Kellie Armstrong MLA,
- Colin Crawford MLA,
- Danny Donnelly MLA,
- Clare Sugden MLA, and
- Alan Robinson MLA

During the roundtable event, the Consultative Panel and participants took the opportunity to engage directly with the Ministers and MLAs in attendance to discuss the issues being raised in the Parliament.

9. The following 33 recommendations were called for by the speakers and other participants during the Parliament:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations 1-4:

Equal access to appropriate healthcare and services

“We have paid our taxes and National Insurance throughout our lives, so why are the very services that we have paid for not available to us when we are starting to need them more?”

David Jamison, Engage with Age

1. to review the appointment system with GP surgeries to make it easier and simpler for older people.
2. to address the need for a much more efficient arrangement for hospital discharges that causes less stress for older people.
3. to develop legislation for Northern Ireland to prevent age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services.
4. to review and address the Department of Health’s budget plan and its impact on older people. From the 11 cost-saving measures that are offered, 10 will affect older people, and five directly target older people.

Recommendations 5-9:

Travel and Transport

“The negative effect of prolonged loneliness, especially on older people, is regarded by health professionals to be a public health issue.”

Adrienne Brown, AGEnda

5. to extend transport connectivity to rural areas.
6. to consider the number of well-covered, seated bus shelters, the safe access to and egress from bus stops, and the number of accessible, affordable and user-friendly public car parking facilities.
7. the need for an Accessible Transport Strategy for older people to be implemented in Northern Ireland.
8. ease of access to appropriate benefits to assist with transport costs.
9. continuous consultation and engagement with those who plan transport policy and services ensuring that older people have a valued voice.

Recommendations 10-14:

Education and Work

“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.”

Wilma Stewart, Age NI

10. to maintain awareness of the health and societal benefits of providing educational opportunities for older people at a range of levels.
11. to ensure further education is at a cost older people can afford when seeking educational opportunities.
12. to provide educational opportunities for older people at a time they feel comfortable leaving their homes.
13. to ensure educational opportunities are in locations older people can access, wherever they live.
14. to maintain an awareness of the support and needs of older people in relation to education and work in order to foster a happier, healthier and well-connected generation.

Recommendations 15-17:

Loneliness & Isolation

“... a topic that touches the lives of many but is often left in the shadows.”

Valerie Cobain, U3a

15. the need for a Loneliness Strategy to be implemented in Northern Ireland.
16. to provide government support for schemes which encourage older people to engage in social programmes such as local community centres and volunteering opportunities.

17. to leverage technology as a tool to combat isolation. This will require user-friendly training for older people in the use of technology as a means to communicate and remain in contact.

Recommendations 18-22:

Poverty and Older People

*“About 58,000 pensioners living in poverty,
which is not exactly something that we can be proud of.”*

Ivan Baxter, Engage with Age

18. the Department for Communities to mount a vigorous campaign to improve the up-take of pensions credit and to monitor closely those not taking up the benefit.
19. to consider the Lone Pensioner Allowance which provides a 20% discount to folk living alone, could be increased to 30%.
20. to seek the extension of the GB Warm Home Discount Scheme to Northern Ireland.
21. the Executive to consider ways to increase the budget through investment and raising funds, with the savings ear-marked to reinstate the winter fuel payments for older people in Northern Ireland.
22. include a tenth strategic priority in the PfG in order to plan properly for the impact of an ageing population.

Recommendations 23-26:

Keeping safe from scams, computer accessibility, communication and digital exclusion

*“The digital divide can contribute to social isolation amongst older people.
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.”*

David Jamison, Engage with Age

23. promote inclusive, all user-focused design to ensure that websites and applications are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.
24. offer digital literacy training to provide tailored training programs to help older adults and others develop the skills they need to use technology effectively.
25. support digital inclusion initiatives: encourage programs that provide older adults and others with access to computers, smartphones, and internet connectivity.
26. develop policies that address the digital divide to promote digital equity ensuring that everyone has equal access to technology. “Digital first” should not equal “Digital only” when designing services to be primarily accessed online.

Recommendations 27-30:

Housing and Older People

“Recognise that the quality of accommodation in which a person lives is fundamental to their quality of life.”

James Frizzell, Building Communities Resource Centre

27. the development and implementation of a policy, similar to maternity leave for people who want to care for a loved one.
28. 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 service.
29. the need for options, capacity and availability to accommodate older people who are being discharged from hospital with appropriate support and care packages.
30. when developing housing options for older people, we would appreciate consideration of the following in policies, strategies and action plans:
 - Quality of life
 - Health and well being
 - Isolation and Loneliness
 - Actual space and design
 - Flexibility and adaptability
 - Positive model of ageing

Recommendations 31-33: The Rights of Older People

*“Pensioners do not expect preferential treatment,
but neither do we want discrimination.”*

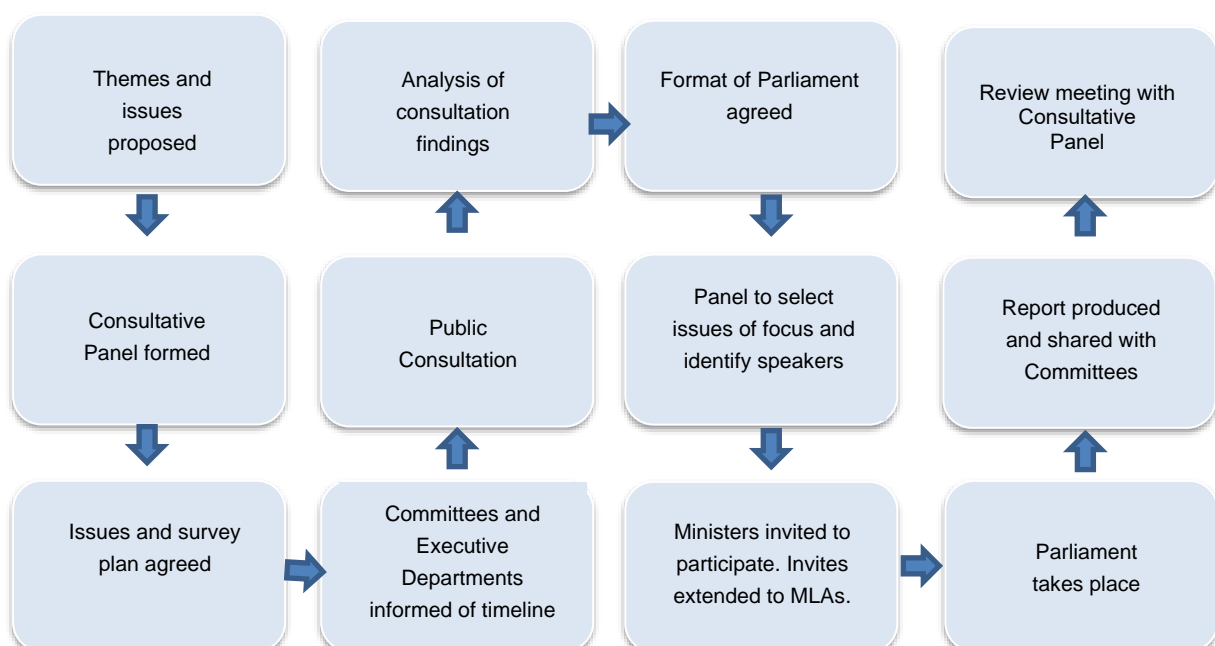
Anne Watson, Age NI

31. to bring forward a law against age discrimination when accessing goods, facilities and services as had previously been included in 2011, and again in the New Decade New Approach Agreement of 2020.
32. invest in services and financial support that will allow us to live well in later life. One in six people is now aged 65 and over. By 2040, it will be one in three people.
33. commit to including the rights of older people in the PfG. The Executive must act to protect the rights of such a large proportion of the population.

BACKGROUND

10. In the past number of years, the Northern Ireland Assembly Public Engagement programme has facilitated several Outreach Parliaments, including: a Women's Parliament; an Older People's Parliament; and a Disabled People's Parliament.
11. Each of the Outreach Parliaments provide a platform for section 75 groups (women, age, and persons with a disability) to engage directly with decision-makers and raise issues of concern.
12. The collective aims of the Outreach Parliaments are to:
 - provide and showcase examples of participative democracy;
 - encourage further engagement with the democratic process; and
 - provide an opportunity to raise awareness and understanding of the work of the Assembly.
13. When the Assembly resumed normal business in February 2024, a new framework was developed to ensure the above aims were met, but also to further raise the profile of the Outreach Parliaments; to increase inclusivity of participants; to encourage the wider public to get involved; and to develop an approach for outputs and actions to be followed up with Assembly Committees and Executive Ministers.

The new framework for Outreach Parliaments is detailed below



14. The new framework was piloted for the Older People's Parliament.
15. A number of groups and organisations who work with and support older people were invited to take part and form a Consultative Panel for the pilot.
16. The groups and organisations on the Consultative Panel were selected based on: the range of service/s they provide; the type of organisation; the size of their network and membership; their location; and their aims and objectives. This was to help ensure that the Panel was inclusive and that a range of different older people's voices were represented.
17. The Consultative Panel membership included:
 - Dorothy Beattie, AGEnda
 - Kellie Turtle, Ann Murray and Anne Watson, Age NI
 - Eamon Quinn and Anna Albrzykowska, Engage with Age
 - Katherine Murphy, Building Communities Resource Centre
 - Valerie Cobain, U3a
 - Olaf Hvattam, North Belfast Senior Citizen's Forum
 - Jenny Marshall, Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership
 - Allison Forbes, South West Age Partnerships
 - Tom Gillen, Retired Workers Committee NI-ICTU
 - Deirdre Murphy and Lindsay Armstrong, Volunteer Now
 - Tracy Gray, Verbal Arts Centre
18. The Consultative Panel agreed the following Terms of Reference for the group:
 - review the themes identified for consultation, advise and agree
 - review the issues identified for consultation, advise and agree
 - support and agree a motion to be heard in the Parliament
 - provide and inform the Engagement Team of keynote speakers and the issue to be addressed
 - support the Engagement Team on the day of the Parliament.
19. A public survey to determine the issues to be raised in the Older People's Parliament was published on 31 July. The survey closed on 4 September with almost 1700 responses, identifying the following eight key issues:
 - Equal access to appropriate healthcare & services
 - Transport and Travel
 - Loneliness & Isolation

- Poverty and Older People
- Education and Work
- Keeping safe from scams, computer accessibility, communication and digital exclusion
- Housing for Older People
- Rights of Older People

20. The Consultative Panel agreed on a motion-based format for the Parliament, with a series of speeches focusing on each of the key priority issues arising from the survey.

APPROACH

21. The Consultative Panel worked collaboratively with the Engagement Office in the design and delivery of the Older People's Parliament, meeting six times to plan and prepare for the event.
22. The Consultative Panel agreed to focus on the PfG in the development of the motion and the speeches for the Parliament. Many of the organisations on the Consultative Panel had individual plans to respond to the PfG, but felt the Parliament provided an additional opportunity to raise a range of important issues with the Executive.
23. The Assembly's Research team, RaISe, supported the planning and preparation of the Parliament by producing a draft list of themes and issues which affect older people across Northern Ireland. The Consultative Panel agreed the 'long-list' of issues, which then formed the basis of the public consultation survey. It was agreed by the Consultative Panel that the top eight issues identified from the survey would be the topics raised in the Parliament.
24. The Consultative Panel's involvement was extremely important to the success of the consultation exercise. Each organisation was able to circulate the survey electronically and encourage their members and networks to respond. The Panel were also provided with paper copies to distribute as required.
25. Consultative Panel members identified groups and organisations who requested additional help and support in completing the survey. The Engagement Team were able provide this support by visiting these groups, assisting them with the completion of the survey, and taking the opportunity to hold workshops about the role and work of the Assembly.
26. In addition, the Consultative Panel agreed that the Engagement Team would undertake a range of activities to promote the survey, including:
 - running a series of promotional adverts on social media,
 - posting social media content across a range of Assembly accounts,
 - contacting Assembly Committees to raise awareness of the survey,
 - contacting Executive Departments and Ministers to provide information about the Parliament and the survey,
 - writing to MLAs with details of the survey and the Parliament,
 - including content on the Assembly electronic newsletter, and
 - promoting the survey in a range of workshops with community groups.

27. Almost 1,700 responses to the consultation survey were received, clearly identifying eight top priority issues. The high volume of responses demonstrated the interest in the Parliament and the need for the issues to be raised.

28. The table below show the percentage results from the 1,700 respondents.

Equal access to appropriate healthcare and services	6.39%
Transport and travel	4.19%
Rights of older people	4.06%
Loneliness and isolation	3.79%
Older people and poverty	3.53%
Keeping safe from scams	2.81%
Value of older people to community life	2.64%
Value of older people to the economy	2.48%

“What an amazing piece of work, giving older people a choice to use their voice. The survey results - provides us with so much evidence of need.”

Dorothy Beattie, AGEnda

29. RaiSe also produced a paper for the Consultative Panel containing statistics and background information on each of the issues identified from the public survey. This information was used by the speakers when developing their speeches for the Parliament.

THE PARLIAMENT

Eight issues were raised during the Older People's Parliament on 12 October 2024.

ISSUE 1: Equal Access to Appropriate Healthcare and Services

Supporting Organisation: Engage with Age

Speaker: Ivan Baxter

Interventions: David Jamison and Godfrey Brock-Gadd

30. Mr Baxter raised concerns about older people not being able to get a doctor's appointment at their GP surgery; an issue backed up by both Mr Jamison *"getting to the point of treatment is a nightmare for older people"* and Mr Godfrey Brock-Gadd *"GPs are letting older people in Northern Ireland down."* Mr Baxter suggested that the healthcare system in Northern Ireland is forcing older people towards private care, which is unaffordable.
31. Mr Baxter highlighted that the Department of Health's plan for managing its budget will have a catastrophic impact on older people. He suggested that of the 11 cost-saving measures 10 will affect older people, and 5 are directly targeting older people.

ISSUE 2: Transport and Travel

Supporting Organisation: AGEnda

Speaker: Norma Jeffers

Intervention: Adrienne Brown

32. Mrs Jeffers provided the Parliament with statistics from NISRA (Census 2021) that demonstrated the population increase from 2011 to 2021 was greatest in the older age group. While there were some positives such as pedestrianised areas, Motability and Shopmobility scooter scheme, blue badges and the SmartPass *"there are still gaps and challenges - there is a need for connectivity improvements."*
33. Mrs Jeffers stressed that transport challenges have impacts. Limited access to everyday activities such as, health appointments, banks, shops, meeting family and friends, social activities and all the things people may take for granted. Mrs Brown emphasised the impact of lack of transport on the mental health and

wellbeing of older people and called for a loneliness strategy which would address this issue.

ISSUE 3: Education and Work

Supporting Organisation: Age NI

Speaker: Marian Cinnamond

Interventions: Wilma Stewart and George Bell

34. Ms Cinnamond drew attention to the fact that *“there is no shortage of evidence to show that learning new things is beneficial to older people ... [but] I have had to refrain from signing up for classes on cost grounds.”* Ms Cinnamond asked the Assembly to maintain the health and societal benefits of providing educational opportunities for older people at a range of levels, at a cost that they can afford, at times when they feel comfortable leaving their home, and in locations they can access.
35. Mrs Stewart in her intervention highlighted the need to support older people of working age and this should be a measure in the anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland: *“no older person should be in poverty. A person’s financial position upon retirement is linked to their circumstances over their lifetime, like their employment history, earning levels and time out of the labour market.”*
36. Mr Bell in his intervention raised awareness of a UK government appointment of a business champions for older workers. The current champion was chair of Business in the Community’s Age at Work leadership team. He stated *“the time is ripe for the Assembly to appoint a business champion for older workers in Northern Ireland.”*

ISSUE 4: Loneliness and Isolation

Supporting Organisation: U3A

Speaker: Mrs Valerie Cobain

Intervention: Mavis Turner

37. Mrs Cobain raised in her speech the issue that many older people enter their golden years, after decades of hard work and dedication, but this does not mean

a life of leisure and relaxation. For many older people, *“the reality is far from idyllic. Instead of peace, they often find themselves confronted with a quiet void, feeling disconnected and invisible.”*

38. During her intervention Mrs Turner made the remark *“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 problems, including heart disease, depression and cognitive decline.”*

ISSUE 5: Poverty and Older People

Supporting Organisation: Engage with Age

Speaker: Ivan Baxter

Interventions: Thomas Hinds and Joan Hayes

39. Mr Baxter informed the Parliament that in Northern Ireland about one fifth of the population can be classified as older and this proportion is growing and will reach about a quarter in 20 years' time. Of the older people's population, about one quarter live in poverty, according to the latest figures from the Department of Communities.... *“that works out about 58,000 pensioners living in poverty which is not exactly something that we can be proud of.”*
40. Mr Hinds stressed that older people feel cheated and neglected when, in return for years of hard work, paying tax and public contributions *“our pensions seem to be increasingly insignificant, with benefits like the winter fuel payment being removed.”*
41. Mrs Hayes asked *“who will pay for old age in the future so that older people are not living in poverty?”* She highlighted that there was no strategy for coping with an aging population and suggested that the Executive are *“sleepwalking into an economic tsunami of the same size as the crisis in healthcare, childcare and the environment”*. Mrs Hayes suggested that the PfG should have a tenth priority to strategically plan for the impact of an ageing population.

ISSUE 6: Keeping safe from scams; Computer Accessibility; Communication; and digital Exclusion

Supporting Organisation: Engage with Age

Speaker: David Jamison

Interventions: Godfrey Brock-Gadd and Ruth Girvan

42. Mr Jamison opened his speech by stating he was going to address the digital divide and bridging the gap for older adults. *“Digital literacy is a growing need. Older adults sometimes have limited experience with computers and smartphones, making it difficult for them to learn those new technologies.”*
43. He continued raising concerns about economic disadvantage and how the inability to use digital technologies can have economic consequences for older people. He stated that millions of pounds goes unclaimed because some older people have difficulty getting online to apply for benefits, and then lose interest in finding other ways to submit claims.
44. Mr Brock-Gadd intervened and highlighted that technology and computers can indeed improve some aspects of life, revealing his use of emails and internet, but there are aspects of technology that are not in favour of older people. Scams are a constant concern, to which Mr Jamison informed the Chamber that in the past 13 months there were 5,412 reports of fraud made to the PSNI with reported total loss of approximately £23.1 million.
45. Mrs Girvan agreed that navigating the modern digital world is *“all very challenging for my peers.”* She highlighted the cost of broadband could be a real problem when you are struggling with the cost of food and heating your home. Mrs Girvan also agreed that scammers are directly targeting older people. *“Lonely older people are sitting ducks for scam callers.”*

ISSUE 7: Housing for older people

Supporting Organisation: Building Communities Resource Centre

Speaker: Mr James Frizzell

Intervention: Jillian McIntyre and Marbeth Hedley

46. Mr Frizzell in his opening remarks declared *“a warm, comfortable safe and accessible home is a necessity for every older person.”* He then informed the Parliament that there is a shortage of older people’s accommodation across Northern Ireland. There have been some developments *“but why, 10 years on, are we still asking the same questions and examining the same policies and strategies with no clear action?”*
47. Mrs McIntyre supported these comments and highlighted the importance of considering the rural aspect of housing. *“We need to take into account those who want to live a rural life and don’t want to move to a town.”* 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.

48. Mrs Hedley followed Mrs McIntyre with an intervention supporting her colleagues but also highlighting 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.”*

ISSUE 8: Rights of older people

Supporting Organisation: Age NI

Speaker: Anne Watson

Interventions: Ann Murray and George Bell

49. Ms Watson started her speech by declaring *“pensioners do not expect preferential treatment but neither do we want discrimination.”* She went on to describe how upsetting it is that the draft PfG has left out the issue of age discrimination, which was included in the 2011 PfG and again the New Decade, New Approach agreement in 2020. Ms Watson asked *“how much longer must we wait for the Northern Ireland Executive to follow through on a commitment that they made 14 years ago?”*

50. Ms Murray in her intervention drew attention to the recent Age NI evidence, submitted to an inquiry being held by the Committee for the Executive Office, into gaps in equality law. The evidence focused on the disparity in age discrimination protection across these islands. In GB age discrimination in the delivery of goods, facilities and services has been prohibited since 2012 *“that is when the age regulations were added to the Equality Act 2010.”*

51. Mr Bell described in his intervention that for many older people there are the additional, hidden costs and restrictive charges for such things as *“purchasing holiday essentials such as travel insurance and car hire.”* He provided evidence from ‘Which’, demonstrating that the cost of insurance for older people, particularly since the pandemic, has risen disproportionately when compared to what is paid by other groups.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

52. The Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) provided support to the Parliament. In addition to compiling a list of relevant themes, issues and statistics, RaISe produced a Topical Digest which provided an overview of the issues to be discussed in the Parliament and a further reading list. This was produced to aid the Consultative Panel and participants in drafting speeches.

53. A copy of the Topical Digest can be found at Annex 1.

NEXT STEPS

54. A copy of this Report will be sent to The Executive Office as the Panel's response to the Programme for Government.
55. The Deputy Speaker, John Blair MLA committed to sending a copy of the Official Report from the Older People's Parliament to the First and deputy First Minister.
56. A copy of this Report will also be issued to:
- Assembly Statutory Committees
 - Executive Ministers
 - The Commissioner for Older People
 - The All Party Group on Ageing and Older People
 - MLAs
57. In addition, the Engagement Team will work with the Consultative Panel to agree strategic steps to build on the discussions and outcomes from the event, including:
- Recording feedback of the event and the framework
 - Developing an action plan
 - Engaging with key stakeholders
 - Raising further awareness of the issues
 - Creating working groups to tackle specific issues
 - Monitoring progress
 - Arranging follow-up events
58. By taking these steps, the Engagement Team will support the Consultative Panel to help ensure that the Older People's Parliament will lead to meaningful engagement with decision makers.

CONCLUSION

59. In conclusion, the Older People's Parliament held on 12 October 2024 brought to light a multitude of pressing issues affecting older people in Northern Ireland. From healthcare access to transportation challenges, the discussions called for action to address a plethora of issues which have the potential to impact the well-being of an increasingly aging population.
60. The speakers underscored the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address these challenges, emphasising that older individuals should not be marginalised or discriminated against.
61. Key issues such as healthcare, poverty levels, social isolation, digital exclusion, and inadequate housing were identified as critical and requiring immediate attention.
62. The discussions also pointed to the importance of recognising the rights of older people, ensuring they are protected from discrimination and have access to necessary services and support.
63. Throughout the Older People's Parliament, the message was that the Northern Ireland Executive should take decisive action to implement policies that recognise the needs of older people, fostering an inclusive society where they can thrive.
64. The Older People's Parliament called for the rights, needs and concerns of older people in Northern Ireland to be placed at the centre of the new Programme for Government. The Consultative Panel are hopeful that by sharing this report, the voices of older people will be heard at the highest levels of government, resulting in an inclusive Programme for Government for everyone in Northern Ireland.

[Topical Digest](#)

[Hansard Report Older People's Parliament 12 October 2024](#)

Coverage (press and social media)

[Press Release 14 October 2024 - The Northern Ireland Assembly hosts the Older People's Parliament](#)

[Press Release 15 August 2024 - Assembly Speaker urges older to people to share key issues](#)

Social Media Statistics: reached about 5.5k people