

**Meeting with The Commissioner for Older People NI - 22 October 2021 – via Zoom**

**Attendees:** Eddie Lynch (Commissioner), [redacted] Policy Officer), Peter Luney, Jane Holmes, [redacted] (TEO Covid Strategy and Recovery Division).

Peter Luney welcomed all and opening the meeting, providing an overview of the process and background behind the Recovery Plan:

- A cross -departmental approach was used with all departments included. This approach recognised that departments are best placed to understand the impacts upon their sectors and know what action is required to address the impacts.
- Departments provided interventions which were assessed against three gateway criteria, to refine and leave 83 high level interventions which were brought into an overarching that the Executive could sign up to.
- The criteria applied were: was this in response to an issue made worse by pandemic, can it be delivered or start to have an impact within timeframe 2 years and would citizens be better off.
- For those interventions not carried forward it does not mean they will not be delivered, this exercise was to sharpen focus identifying the high-level key issues that can be taken forward collaboratively to maximise impact and reduce burden on stakeholders.
- One challenge was to produce a plan that set out what was required but in a level of detail that was consumable by stakeholders sand the public, there were previous iterations before the published plan was finalised. Earlier versions had mapped out the interventions again draft Programme for Government Outcomes and set out opportunities for collaboration. We are willing to share this information if it is helpful.
- In terms of Recovery Accelerators, we looked across the other jurisdictions in terms of benchmarking and there are similarities in identifying the key themes.

- Plan delivered at pace –.as a result engagement and screening were compressed and we accept criticism on that front. We recognise the plan will need to change throughout its lifespan, priorities now may not be the same and we will not be aware of the all impacts on citizens at this point. Ongoing engagement will be vital to this.
- The plan is to keep engagement ongoing for the life of the plan. This will provide opportunity to update stakeholders on progress but also to find out from stakeholders the issues and challenges within their sectors in order to inform review.
- Recovery Taskforce has been established to oversee delivery of plan –drive collaboration and for monitoring and reporting ti the Executive. First reports are due before the end of the year and these will be shared with all key stakeholders and published on the internet.

Eddie Lynch provided his views:

Agreed there was a real need for plan like this and that the full impact of the pandemic is not known nor will be known for some time to come. Older people need support to bounce back and some issues were highlighted:

- HSC – Residential and Nursing Home sector – fear and hesitancy around placing people in care, not only vaccine related but also from visiting perspective with restrictions still operating. People need reassured to bring some sort of normality back to the sector. They are currently working with DoH on this.
- Appreciate that interventions around HSC elective care, waiting lists etc. will benefit older people. An important issue is to ensure that age discrimination does not feature and older people get pushed down waiting lists.
- Workforce issues – Covid has exacerbated work force provision in care sector. Problems have been highlighted in domiciliary care sector also in terms of getting care packages in place due to staffing levels. Geographical variances have emerged on this issue. The Vaccine programme has worked well but workforce is still affected by close contacts and +ve cases, also

seasonal flu will impact. Mandatory vaccine approach will not work in this sector, it would likely force people out of the sector. Sector reps are not attributing workforce pressure to EU exit at present.

- There is a need to address low rates of pay and lack of career progression to make the sector a more attractive, this is required to address the needs of the sector with increasing demands placed upon it due to an ageing population. This is a problem that needs addressed now.
- Health Minister announced adult social care reform which is badly needed. However, there is a huge process to go through to consider requirements, cost and how to fund.
- In the community action is required to help older people gain confidence to fully emerge from behaviours brought about by the pandemic. The vaccine programme has helped but other factors need addressed. Social networks and support groups have disappeared, these need to be re-established to help tackle social isolation and loneliness. These services also act as hubs for users to obtain various supports and access to information, as well as encouraging social interactions. It is widely accepted that social interactions help support physical and mental health.
- Financial issues are not thought to play a major role in these social groups/networks, it is thought to be more about lack of confidence in entering back into the community again, along with perhaps lack of volunteers, for example, where a service was previously provided by a small number of people they may not want to resume that service. There is an urgent need action to regenerate those groups – it is perhaps something councils could support via their age friendly work. There is a lack of data in this area also, which makes it more difficult for those in providing service to obtain financial funding.
- Older people are fearful to start using public transport again – if this is not addressed it will add to social exclusion.
- Impact on those bereaved during the pandemic – work is being take forward by NR to establish a Bereavement Network
- Energy bill increases will cause huge problems over the winter. With older people spending more time at home as a result of the pandemic they face

increased energy useage coupled with higher energy bills and more will face fuel poverty this winter. This has the potential to transform into a health risk and well as financial, if we experience harsh winter expect more deaths in the older population. Last winter there were approx. 900 excess deaths the majority were older people. COPNI has called on the DfC Minister or immediate support.

- It was highlighted that older people are at higher risk of being targeted by scammers.
- Major issue for COPNI is that draft PfG or previous PfG did not have an outcome focussed on older people. When specific sections of the population are not directly called out in strategies it is more difficult to obtain funding and support. COPNI has met the political parties on this issue suggesting it needs included in their mandates for the next election. COPNI is calling for a 15th high level outcome focused on an ageing population. This omission is mirrored in the Recovery Plan with only 2 mentions of older people after the foreword compared to 19 inclusions for young people.
- **Action:** COPNI was invited to submit ideas on practical measures that could be considered to address the challenges, for TEO to consider and reflect in future revisions and to bring to attention of those involved in delivery of the plan.