



Are public attitudes towards older people changing?

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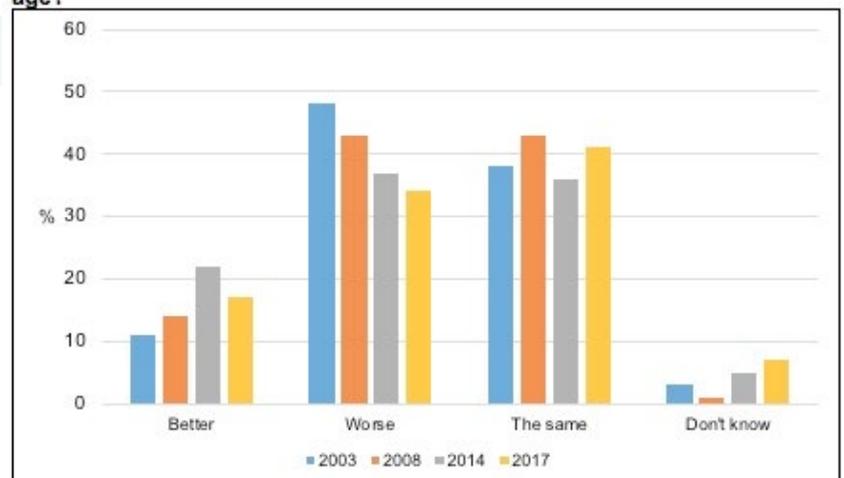
Population Ageing: the local context for a global issue

Twenty years ago, people living in Northern Ireland could expect to live to be about 77. However, a boy born now can expect to live to be 79 years of age, and a girl 82 years (Office of National Statistics, 2017). This local change is part of a global trend causing leading researchers to investigate 'how population change will transform our world' (Harper, 2016). One factor driving change in the global population has been the decrease in fertility levels. In Northern Ireland, the average completed family size for a woman born in 1950 was 2.09. It is estimated that this will fall to 1.84 for a woman born in 2015 (Office for National Statistics, 2017a). When you put these changes together, the combination of increased life expectancy, lower mortality rates and falling fertility levels are recognised as the main drivers for a silent, global revolution: population ageing. This trend varies across the globe, with countries in Western Europe identified as at the most advanced stage in the demographic transition while regions such as sub-Saharan Africa are still at stage one (see Harper, 2016: 5).

Any major population change will have social and political consequences for society. So, the challenge now is to adapt our social policy infrastructure for this extended and more complex life course. Put simply, an older demographic profile will require policy-makers and politicians to change resource allocation to meet increased need in areas like health and social care. An important aspect of making this transition will be the continuation of high levels of solidarity and mutual respect between generations.

For all of these reasons, ARK researchers decided to investigate public attitudes towards ageing and older people in Northern Ireland. We asked questions in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2003, 2008, 2014 and 2017 exploring issues such as Does a person's age affect how they are treated? Do older people command more respect, or does ageing come with a declining social status? Should we retire at 60, or is retirement a thing of the past? What is the status of inter-generational relations? Does society recognise older people as capable of making a contribution to society and community? In this Feature, we hone in on general attitudes towards older people living in Northern Ireland.

Figure 1: Do you think that older people are, on the whole, treated better or worse than people in the general population in this country because of their age?



The survey data suggest that attitudes towards older people seem to change depending on the age of the respondent. **Figure 1** indicates there is a sense that older people are not worse off than younger cohorts, a steady trend throughout the years. In 2003, nearly one half of respondents thought that older people are treated worse than people in the general population because of their age. By 2017, this had fallen to 34%. A gender pattern across all survey years are notable differences across age groups, with those aged 45-54 years being most likely to think that older people are treated worse than the general public, whilst people aged 75 years or over are the group most likely to think that older people are treated better.

Table 1 shows some change in experiences of respect with age. One quarter of people in both 2003 and 2017 say that they get treated with more respect as they get older. During those 14 years, there has been a fall in the proportion of people who say that they are treated with less respect, and an increase in those saying that they are treated with the same level of respect.

Table 1: As you get older, do you find that people treat you with more respect or less respect?

	%			
	2003	2008	2014	2017
More	24	35	37	23
Less	36	27	22	18
The same	37	38	38	56
Don't know	3	0	3	4

There was a strong sense among 2017 NILT respondents that society doesn't recognise the contribution that many older people are still able to make: three quarters agreed with this statement to some extent. However, this is lower than in previous years: 2003 (86%) and 2008 (92%).

The policy context in Northern Ireland

Even with generally positive attitudes towards older people reflected in our surveys, the policy context for ageing societies is challenging. For instance, between 2006 and 2016, the number of people aged 85 and over in Northern Ireland rose by 35% (NISRA, 2017). This is a significant change given that an older population may need different services, face particular challenges. However, it also presents unprecedented opportunities for our society in terms of longer working lives, voluntarism and grand-parenting (Carney, Acheson and Scharf, 2014). Reflecting this, between 2006 and 2016, several strategies and policies aimed at meeting the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population have been developed. In 2011, the post of Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland was set up, whilst in 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive Office published its Active Ageing Strategy 2016-21. The focus of that strategy is to enable people to enjoy longer, healthier and active lives, and transform attitudes towards older people by placing an emphasis on rights, value and contribution rather than needs, cost and burden.

Conclusion

Our research into public attitudes towards older people suggests that the barriers to accessing a healthy, happy and productive old age are likely to emerge from failure to adapt existing services rather than from negative attitudes towards older people. It falls to politicians and policy-makers to anticipate the needs of future generations of older people, and to work hard to maintain high levels of inter-generational solidarity, which underpin the pensions, health and social care that make Northern Ireland a good place to grow old.

References:

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Notes:

This ARK Feature is part of ARK's Marking Anniversaries series, which reflects on important historical events, and explore how attitudes and perceptions in Northern Ireland have changed over time. For more information, see www.ark.ac.uk/ma2018

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