

Older People in Northern Ireland:

Report 1: Setting the scene

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Introduction

This is the first of a series of fact sheets to be published over the coming year on the needs and circumstances of older people in Northern Ireland. By older people we mean persons aged 50 years or over. The impetus for this project derives from a number of concerns raised by members of voluntary organisations and others representing older people.

Firstly, there has been concern about lack of information on older people in Northern Ireland. The problem here is not that the data does not exist but that it is scattered across a number of sets of data. Our primary intention, building on other work (NISRA, 2003), is therefore to bring the material together, subject it to further analysis and present it in an accessible manner to assist those seeking to promote change to the benefit of older people.

Secondly, there has been concern that in the debate on social need, a hierarchy has developed with the result being that the poverty experienced by some groups appears to be viewed as of greater significance than that of others. Whilst the recent consultation document “Ageing in an Inclusive Society” (OFMDFM, 2004a) made some amends, the earlier consultation document on targeting social need “New TSN - the way forward” (OFMDFM, 2004b) is notable for its lack of attention to pensioner poverty. We know, however, that for many older people poverty is a real problem. For example, the 1999/2000 Life and Times survey indicated that 59% of sole female pensioners in Northern Ireland had incomes below what was required to secure a basic, minimum standard of living (Evason, Dowds and Devine, 2002). We also know that the problem of pensioner poverty is likely to increase as the basic state pension continues to decline as a percentage of average earnings and many pensioners remain reluctant to claim means-tested support. At the same time, employers are seeking to reduce their involvement in pension provision for employees. In consequence, it is essential that the needs of older people are, alongside other groups, given their place, in debates on poverty and social need. We hope our fact sheets will contribute to this.

A third concern relates to the unhelpful assumptions and unthinking assertions that permeate discussions in the media - often promoted in the past by policy makers - on the fact that we are an ageing society. In essence, this is presented as intrinsically problematic. Older people are seen as a burden - as dependants - whose growing numbers are likely to place intolerable strain on our health and social care services, render our pensions policies unsustainable and give rise to costs which younger taxpayers will find insupportable. Whilst in the UK, and many other countries, demographic trends may be testing, these generally negative perspectives need to be examined more closely.

First and foremost, as others (Arber and Ginn, 2004) have noted, the fact that we are an ageing society is, actually, a sign of success - something to celebrate. The fact that people are living longer is a reflection of the considerable achievements in the post-war period in raising living standards and improving health care. Moreover, when we look at the data, terms such as “demographic explosion” may be considered to be more alarmist than helpful. Beyond this, framing the debate in terms of dependency is unsatisfactory because it discounts the past and current contributions made by older people. Older people will have been making provision for the future for decades by paying their tax, national insurance contributions and contributions to occupational and private pension schemes. Moreover, older people continue to contribute to society in a variety of ways. For example, older people are a significant source of informal care and thus play a substantial part in alleviating pressure on health and social care services. Older people are also major providers of childcare, helping their children to remain in employment. All of this is often overlooked, although one recent study (Meadows and Cook, 2004) suggests that the unpaid work of persons aged 50 years or over in the UK is, in cash terms, worth £24 billion a year.

A further unhelpful element within this general preoccupation with dependency, is the unthinking use of the statistics relating to the number of persons of working age in relation to the number of older persons – the dependency ratio. Here again trends are testing, but more careful analysis is required. It is projected that in Northern Ireland we will move from having 3.9 persons of working age for each person of pensionable age in 2001 to 2.3 persons of working age for each pensioner in 2041. The real issue here, however, is not how many people we have in each age group but how many of those of working age are actually in employment and levels of productivity. Whilst it might be assumed that the ratio of younger to older people was more benign thirty or forty years ago, the position was tighter than the raw statistics suggest because it was much less common for married women to be in employment. Thus, increasing economic activity amongst married women and lone parents needs to be taken into account when looking to the future. Linked into this is the issue of raising economic activity rates amongst those between the ages of 50 and state retirement age-60 (women)/65 (men). It can be argued that the solution to many current concerns lies not in getting people to work past retirement age but enabling and encouraging them to work up to it. Recent research (Meadows and Cook, 2004) suggests a rise of one third of a per cent per year in employment amongst those aged 50-69 would be more than enough to offset the economic challenge of an ageing population and would add £63 billion to economic output by 2021.

Turning to the specific impact on health and pensions of an ageing population, a number of points need to be borne in mind. The fact that a particular age group may double or treble in size over the coming decades does not mean that the need for health care will rise in direct proportion to this increase. Older people today are fitter and healthier than they were decades ago and ongoing improvement will moderate the need for care. We also need to take account of the ways in which technology can assist. Innovations that we now take for granted - such as stair-lifts - are enabling many more people to manage independently for longer. This is not to say that there will be no increase in costs, but careful analysis is required. It can be noted that one authoritative report (Sutherland, 1999) concluded that the cost of long term care for older people in the UK - in total from all sources - would rise from 1.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1995 to 1.9% in 2051.

With regard to pensions, here again careful thought is required. While demographic trends are important, much also depends on the soundness and reliability of the mechanisms available to enable people to make provision for the future. State systems which rely heavily on means-testing may discourage saving. Strategies which rely on stock market performance may leave many exposed to risk. The experience of other countries suggests a need for some adjustments, a willingness to spend more and ongoing review. Pessimistic projections about the future sustainability of state pensions may be undermined by a growth in the number of women, immigrants and older people working and paying tax and national insurance contributions. Notwithstanding these general observations, it is clear that, whatever the case elsewhere, as a result of past cuts and our relatively ungenerous state provision, there is no looming financial crisis in the UK. It is projected (DWP, 2002) that spending on state pensions will stay at around 5% of GDP over the coming half century. This is a very low level of expenditure compared with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and it can be argued that in the UK the question is not whether our strategy is sustainable financially but whether this is sustainable politically and socially. Should we be planning to spend more? Is, as has recently been suggested (House of Lords, 2003), the real crisis in British pensions “a crisis of adequacy”?

We will be returning to these and other issues in future fact sheets which will cover such topics as income and pensioner poverty; health and caring; the particular needs of those between the age of 50 and retirement age, housing and social inclusion. The final fact sheet will look at data for the Republic of Ireland. In this publication we set the scene, with a review of data on persons of pensionable age (60 years or over for women, and 65 years or over for men) in Northern Ireland, touching on many of themes to be addressed in more detail in later fact sheets.

How many older people are there in Northern Ireland?

Table 1 sets out the number of persons of pensionable age (60 for women/65 for men) in Northern Ireland by age and gender. It can be seen that these account for 15.89% of the total population, with women heavily outnumbering men. This is a longstanding differential, although in the broader UK context it appears to be narrowing. Nevertheless, the imbalance demonstrates the need for pensions policies to take full account of the particular life patterns of women who account for the majority of pensioners.

Table 1: Estimated population of pensionable age

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
60-64 years	-	-	40,445	4.65	40,445	2.38
65-69 years	31,734	3.81	35,735	4.11	67,469	3.96
70-74 years	25,743	3.09	32,675	3.76	58,418	3.43
75-79 years	19,297	2.32	28,224	3.24	47,521	2.79
80-84 years	12,108	1.45	21,071	2.42	33,179	1.95
85+ years	6,525	0.78	17,035	1.96	23,560	1.38
All pensioners	95,407	11.46	175,185	20.14	270,592	15.89
Total population	832,822	100.00	869,806	100.00	1,702,628	100.00

Source: NISRA, Mid-Year Population Estimates, 2003

Comparisons with the UK and the Republic of Ireland

Table 2 indicates that within the UK context, Northern Ireland has a relatively youthful population, as well as having a lower proportion of people aged 65 years or over than any other region apart from London.

Table 2: Proportion of older people by region

	% of total population		
	60/65-74	75 and over	Total
South West	12.1	9.3	21.4
North East	11.8	7.6	19.4
East	11.2	7.9	19.1
South East	10.8	8.1	18.9
Yorkshire and Humber	11.1	7.6	18.7
North West	11.2	7.4	18.6
West Midlands	11.1	7.5	18.6
East Midlands	11.0	7.6	18.6
Northern Ireland	9.6	6.1	15.7
London	8.3	5.7	14.0
UK	10.9	7.5	18.4
Wales	11.8	8.4	20.2
Scotland	11.6	7.2	18.8
England	10.8	7.6	18.4
Northern Ireland	9.6	6.1	15.7

Source: ONS, Population Trends 116, summer 2004, based on mid-2002 population estimates

Table 3 indicates that the Republic of Ireland has a lower proportion of older people than Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole, with only 13% of its population being of pensionable age.

Table 3: Estimated population of pensionable age, Republic of Ireland

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
60-64 years	-	-	79,800	3.99	79,800	2.01
65-69 years	66,100	3.34	69,200	3.46	135,300	3.40
70-74 years	53,100	2.69	60,500	3.02	113,600	2.86
75-79 years	37,400	1.89	52,300	2.61	89,700	2.25
80-84 years	23,300	1.18	38,300	1.91	61,600	1.55
85+ years	13,000	0.66	29,800	1.49	42,800	1.08
All pensioners	192,900	9.76	329,900	16.48	522,800	13.14
Total population	1,977,200		2,001,700		3,978,900	

Source: Central Statistics Office, Population Estimates, 2003
(<http://www.eirestat.cso.ie/diska/PEAA.csv>)

How long can we expect to live?

In the debate on ageing an impression is sometimes given that dramatic changes have been occurring. In fact changes occur over fairly lengthy periods, thus allowing time for planning and adjustment. Table 4 sets out the improvement in life expectancy that has occurred in Northern Ireland over the past 50 years. As we indicate above these are clear achievements but at a steady rate. Thus for women aged 65 each decade has resulted in one extra year in life expectancy.

Table 4: Life expectancy by gender and selected years

	Expectation of life at ...			
	Birth		Age 65 years	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1950-52	65.5	68.8	12.1	13.5
1970-72	67.6	73.7	12.0	15.2
1990-92	72.6	78.5	14.0	18.0
1999-2001	74.8	79.8	15.3	18.5

Source: NISRA, Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2003

How many older people will there be in years to come?

Turning to the future, Table 5 shows the proportion of people aged 65 years or over is projected to rise from 13.3% to 24.8%. However, this increase is over a forty-year period, at the end of which three quarters of the population will still be under 65 years. The sharpest increase will be in the number of people aged 85 years or over, but, as the table indicates, the projection is that there will be 64,000 people in this age group within a total population of 1.7million..

Table 5: Projected population (000s)

	2001	2021	2041
65-74 years	124	173	206
75-84 years	78	104	159
85+ years	23	37	64
Total older population	225	314	429
Total population	1,689	1,769	1,723
Older persons as a % of total population	13.3	17.75	24.8

Source: NISRA, Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2003

Table 6 indicates that, whilst the birth rate in Northern Ireland has declined over the past half century, births still outnumber deaths - in contrast to the position in Wales and Scotland shown in Table 7.

Table 6: Births/deaths per 1000 population

	Births	Deaths
1946-50	22.0	11.9
1966-1970	21.9	10.6
1986	17.8	10.2
2002	12.6	8.6

Source: NISRA, Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2003

Table 7: Components of population change

	000s		
	Births	Deaths	Natural change
England	560.5	497.0	63.5
Northern Ireland	21.5	14.2	7.2
Wales	30.1	32.8	-2.7
Scotland	51.2	57.3	-6.1

Source: ONS, Regional Trends, 2004

How many older people have partners to help and support them?

Table 8 indicates the consequences of women's greater longevity outlined in Table 4. Whilst the majority of male pensioners are married, only two fifths of women have partners. As a result - as Table 9 shows - older women are much more likely than older men to live alone.

Table 8: Marital status by gender and age

	%					
	Males			Females		
	65-74	75+	All pensioners	60-74	75+	All pensioners
Married/remarried	71.9	56.5	65.8	56.4	20.8	43.0
Widowed	10.5	28.0	17.4	27.5	63.0	40.9
Single	12.4	13.4	12.8	10.1	14.8	11.9
Divorced/separated	5.3	2.2	4.1	6.0	1.5	4.3

Source: NISRA, Census of Population, 2001

Table 9: Household composition by age and gender

	%				
	Married/cohabiting couple family	Lives alone	Other*	Communal establishment	Total
Males					
65-74 years	71.5	18.2	8.6	1.6	100
75-84 years	57.4	25.9	11.7	5.0	100
85+ years	34.9	33.3	15.7	16.0	100
Females					
60-74 years	56.1	28.2	14.4	1.3	100
75-84 years	23.0	48.9	20.5	7.5	100
85+ years	5.5	45.0	22.3	27.2	100
All pensioners	49.7	30.8	14.5	4.9	100

* Other: one parent family, not in family but others in household

Source: NISRA, Census of Population, 2001 (commissioned table)

Table 10 indicates that approximately one third of older people live in rural areas. Tables 11 and 12 indicate that persons aged 75 and over are slightly more likely to live in rural areas and to live alone. This clearly has implications for the delivery of health and social care services.

Table 10: Age of head of household by dwelling location

	%	
	Urban	Rural
18-24 years	80	20
25-39 years	71	29
40-59 years	66	34
60-74 years	68	32
75+ years	66	34
All ages	68	32

Definition of urban: Belfast urban area, district town, other town

Definition of rural: small rural settlement, isolated rural

Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2001 House Condition Survey

Table 11: Location by age

	%	
	60/65-74 years	75+ years
Urban	67.5	64.5
Rural	32.5	35.5

Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2001 House Condition Survey (commissioned table)

Table 12: Living alone by location by age

	%	
	60/65-74 years	75+ years
Urban	73.4	68.0
Rural	26.6	32.0

Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2001 House Condition Survey (commissioned table)

How healthy are older people in Northern Ireland?

Table 13 shows that – as would be expected - nearly half of those aged 65 years or over in Northern Ireland live in the Eastern Health and Social Services area. The Western Health and Social Services Board has the fewest older people. Table 14 shows that the majority of older people report their health as being “good” or “fairly good”. Thus, while there is clearly a significant degree of ill health and disability amongst older people in Northern Ireland, this is less than might be expected from the alarmist perspectives discussed in the introduction.

Table 13: Older people within Health and Social Services Board areas

	60/65-74 years	75-84 years	85+ years	Total
Eastern	68,354	35,281	10,848	114,483
Northern	43,881	20,518	5,857	70,256
Southern	29,612	13,639	3,769	47,020
Western	24,485	11,262	3,086	38,833
Northern Ireland	166,332	80,700	23,560	270,592

Source: NISRA, Mid-year population estimates, 2003

Table 14: Reported health status by age and gender

	%	
	60/65-74 years	75+ years
Males		
Good	28.7	24.0
Fairly good	41.5	42.2
Not good	29.8	33.8
Females		
Good	33.3	22.3
Fairly good	36.2	42.8
Not good	30.5	34.9

Source: Continuous Household Survey, 2002/03

Table 15 indicates that reporting of a longstanding illness rises with age, with the majority of older persons falling into this category. Despite this, the table also shows that somewhat lower proportions of people say that their illness actually limits their activities.

Table 15: Longstanding illness by age and gender

	%			
	Longstanding illness		Longstanding illness which limits activities	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
16-44 years	19	21	13	14
45-64 years	42	42	31	32
65-74 years	67	60	49	45
75+ years	69	75	54	61
All ages	34	36	24	26

Source: NISRA, Northern Ireland Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2003 (Continuous Household Survey, 2001/02)

Table 16 is of interest as it indicates that whilst older males are more likely to consult their GPs than younger men, consultation rates amongst women - which are generally higher - remain steady.

Table 16: Consultations with GP in the 14 days before interview by age and gender

	%	
	Males	Females
16-44 years	8	17
45-64 years	14	22
65-74 years	23	23
75+ years	24	21
All ages	13	20

Source: NISRA, Northern Ireland Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2003 (Continuous Household Survey, 2001/02)

Table 17 does, however, suggest that older people in Northern Ireland are in poorer health than older people in England and Scotland.

Table 17: Proportion of over 65s reporting 'good' state of health

	%	
	Males	Females
England	38	37
Scotland	36	39
Northern Ireland	31	26
Wales	32	25

Source: ONS, Regional Trends, 2004

How many older people are in nursing homes or homes for the elderly?

In recent years there has been much discussion of charges for nursing homes and residential accommodation. Benefits advisers are constantly asked if there is any way in which people can protect their assets from such charges. Table 18 helps to put these debates in context by indicating the relatively small number of older persons in nursing/residential care homes. The table also demonstrates the extent to which the state has withdrawn from direct provision in this area.

Table 18: Persons in communal establishments by type of facility

	Number
Medical and care establishments	
Non 'NHS/HSSB' managed	
Nursing home	6,155
Residential care home	2,170
Other	289
'NHS/HSSB' managed	
Psychiatric hospital/home	435
General or other hospital	124
Residential care home	1,240
Other	102
Other establishments	771
Total	11,286

Source: NISRA, Census of Population, 2001

How many older people are carers?

A popular stereotype of informal care is that it is about the young and fit helping those who are older and less able. On this basis Tables 19 and 20 are of considerable interest. They show that, for example, 17% of women aged 60 to 74 are caring for someone in the same household and 6% of older women are caring for someone in another household.

Table 19: Caring for someone in same household

	%		
	60/65-74 years	75+ years	All pensioners
Females	17.0	11.8	15.8
Males	9.1	15.2	11.1

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

Table 20: Caring for someone in another household

	%		
	60/65-74 years	75+ years	All pensioners
Females	8.4	1.5	6.1
Males	4.6	4.1	4.4

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

What are the housing circumstances of older people in Northern Ireland?

A difficulty for many older people these days is that they are asset rich and income poor. As a result of rising house prices they may have substantial assets in the form of the property they occupy but may struggle to make ends meet because of the lowness of the benefits and pensions they receive. Table 21 shows that nearly two thirds of pensioners in Northern Ireland own their homes and, as would be expected, this is a far higher figure than that for younger people. Recent data suggest that, on average, pensioner households occupy property worth £115,000 (Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2 (2002). With regard to renting accommodation, over one fifth of pensioners live in Housing Executive or housing association accommodation, with younger people being more likely to live in private sector rented accommodation.

Table 21: Household tenure

	%		
	Non-pensioner	Pensioner	Total
Own outright	22.7	63.1	30.8
Buying it with the help of a mortgage	55.8	8.9	46.5
Pay part rent and part mortgage	0.3	0.2	0.3
Rented from Housing Executive	11.9	17.0	12.9
Rented from a housing association	1.8	4.9	2.4
Rented privately	6.7	3.1	5.9
Live rent free	0.7	2.8	1.1

Source: Continuous Household Survey, 2002-3

Table 22 indicates that a significant minority of pensioners are not satisfied with their accommodation. A number of issues are of concern – street noise, condensation and damp, for example. However, the most frequently cited problem did not actually relate to the accommodation itself: 18% of male pensioners in Northern Ireland and 21% of female pensioners are unhappy with where they live because of vandalism and crime!

Table 22: Pensioners indicating house problems

	%		
	60/65 to 74 years	75+ years	All pensioners
No problems	59.7	57.2	58.8
1 problem	22.9	25.0	23.7
2 or more problems	17.4	17.8	17.5

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

Are older people in Northern Ireland working on past retirement age?

A central theme that has emerged recently in pensions policy in the UK is that of encouraging older people to work up to and past the state retirement age. Table 23 shows that whilst some pensioners remain in employment, they are very much in a minority and - amongst those who have retired - Table 24 indicates there is little enthusiasm for returning to paid employment. This is in line with other recent research (Evason and Dowds, 2004) which suggests strong reservations amongst older - and younger - people about this core element in government's approach to pensions.

Table 23: Current economic activity (pensioners only)

	%		
	Male	Female	All pensioners
Employed	9.2	7.9	8.4
Retired	89.2	73.1	79.5
Long-term sick	1.6	2.9	2.4
*Other	-	16.1	9.7

* Other includes family care etc.

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

Table 24: Would like full or part-time job

	% who would like a full or part time job		
	60-64 years	65-74 years	All pensioners 60-74
Yes	7.4	7.1	7.3
No	92.6	92.9	92.7

Source: Continuous Household Survey, 2002/03

How much do Northern Ireland's pensioners have to live on?

There is substantial income inequality amongst older people in Northern Ireland just as there is amongst younger age groups. Nevertheless, as Table 25 shows, when it comes to income, age matters.

Table 25: Average gross weekly income by composition of household

	£
Pensioner household with one or two adults	142
Non pensioner adult households	436
Households with children	512
All households	429

*Note: A pensioner household is one where at least three quarters of total income is derived from national insurance and similar pensions including benefits paid instead of - or to supplement - such pensions.

Source: NISRA, Northern Ireland Expenditure and Food Survey, 2001/02

As we indicate in our introduction, in Northern Ireland, as in the UK generally, older women are particularly at risk of poverty. This is for a number of reasons. Women live longer and as time goes on a pension from work which is uprated only in line with prices will be less and less adequate. When husbands die, their wives inherit only half of their occupational pensions. Most critically, however, there is the impact of women's caring responsibilities on their chances of securing an adequate income in retirement. Caring means less time in full-time employment building up entitlement. Caring can also mean taking poorly paid employment which is much less likely to offer access to a good occupational pension scheme.

The costs to women of caring are graphically demonstrated in Table 26. More than half of all male pensioners have pensions from work compared with just over one fifth of women.

Table 26: Income from occupational/personal pension/annuity

	% with income from occupational/personal pension/annuity					
	Males			Females		
	65-74 years	75+ years	All pensioners	60-74 years	75+ years	All pensioners
Occupational pensions	58.9	54.6	57.3	23.4	20.6	22.4
Personal pensions/annuity	11.2	2.0	7.6	5.2	0.8	3.7

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

One consequence of the lower incomes of pensioners generally, and female pensioners in particular, is a heavy reliance on means-tested benefits. In 2003, 34% of those claiming Income Support were retirement pensioners, with the average payment being £47 per week (NISRA, Northern Ireland Abstract of Statistics, 2003). It is also important to note that data from the 1999/2000 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey suggested that as many as 13% of pensioner households could be entitled to - but not claiming - this benefit (Evason, Dowds and Devine, 2002).

How do older people get about?

Table 27 indicates that, as would be expected, older people make fewer journeys than younger people. Older women make the fewest journeys, rely more than others on getting about as passengers in private cars but are also more likely than others to walk.

Table 27: Journeys made per person per year by mode of travel

	Male				Female				All adults
	16-29	30-59	60+	All males	16-29	30-59	60+	All females	
Walk	19	13	20	16	22	16	26	19	18
Car driver	40	67	62	61	35	58	27	47	42
Car passenger	20	7	8	10	27	19	37	24	27
Other private	6	7	3	6	-	1	1	1	3
Bus/Train	10	2	3	3	9	2	7	5	6
Other	7	4	4	4	9	4	2	4	4
All journeys	902	1094	913	1010	988	1144	716	997	1003
Distance travelled (miles per year)	7255	8824	4911	7549	6217	6429	3079	5613	5887

Source: NISRA, DRD Travel Survey, 2000-2002

How safe are older people in Northern Ireland?

Recent research (Evason and Dowds, 2004) has indicated that there is considerable concern amongst the general population in Northern Ireland about crime against older people. The level of anxiety is evident from Table 28 which indicates that across all age groups a majority of interviewees identified crime as one of the main problems facing older people.

Table 28: What do you think are the main problems facing older people in NI today?

	% identifying each problem					
	18-24	25-44	45-49	50-59	60-64	65+
Making ends meet	46	70	57	71	64	56
Fear of crime	82	90	91	91	84	86
Loneliness	52	68	70	74	69	64
Transport	28	31	24	33	25	24
Lack of respect	34	44	34	40	31	32
Keeping warm in winter	43	51	48	58	51	38
Getting employment	25	31	20	30	22	17
Access to healthcare	48	51	49	51	48	42

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2003

Additionally, qualitative research with focus groups of older people (Evason and Whittington, 2003) suggested considerable concern. Many were generally anxious:

“This is a very worrying time. You are nearly concerned to take your purse out in the middle of the street.”

Some had direct and alarming experiences:

“I was going past this group of boys and one of them had a Coca Cola bottle. He went to whack me on the head and I only just got out of the way.”

“Somebody tried to kick the door in. It happened to me four times. They know you are a pensioner. You live in a pensioner’s house.”

How involved are older people in Northern Ireland?

Table 29 shows that a large minority of older people say they are very or fairly interested in politics. Additionally, Table 30 indicates that older people are more likely to vote than younger persons. Moreover, those aged 60/65-74 years are as likely to be involved with organisations such as church groups, community associations and trades unions as those below pensionable age.

Table 29: Level of interest in politics

	%					
	Males			Females		
	65-74 years	75+ years	All male pensioners	60-74 years	75+ years	All female pensioners
Very interested	8.3	13.3	10.7	5.1	4.1	4.7
Fairly interested	33.3	29.5	31.6	30.6	32.5	31.3
Not very interested	44.2	46.7	45.3	38.3	39.0	38.6
Not at all interested	14.2	10.5	12.4	26.0	24.4	25.4

Source: Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

Table 30: Involvement in the broader world

	% who ...	
	Voted in June 2001 General Election*	Are members of an organisation**
Not pensioner	64.0	49.3
60/65-74	82.4	49.3
75+	85.5	44.8

Source: * Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 2, 2002

** Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey, Wave 1, 2001

Table 31, however, shows fairly limited engagement amongst older people with the Internet. This raises important issues. For example, in the search for more cost effective and efficient ways of delivering benefits and services, policy makers are placing growing reliance on information technology with, for example, online claims. The data here indicate that caution must be exercised in the deployment of such strategies when it comes to older people.

Table 31: Access to the Internet

	%	
	16-59/64 years	65+ years
Has access to Internet	61	13
Through home computer	65	83
Through work computer	27	7
Through library computer	2	0
Through digital TV/mobile phone	2	2
Another way	4	9

Source: Continuous Household Survey, 2003-04 (Commissioned table)

Conclusion

This is the first of a series of fact sheets on older people in Northern Ireland. We will be following up a number of the issues touched on in further publications over the coming year. In this fact sheet we have set out the broad picture and also, we hope, challenged some of the stereotypes and assumptions that are a feature of much of the discussion surrounding older people and the fact that we are an ageing society.

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