



# Research Update

## Is Northern Ireland a good place to grow old?

Paula Devine and  
Gemma M Carney

### Introduction

Along with the rest of the globe, the population of Northern Ireland is ageing. It is estimated that between 2013 and 2033, the number of people living in Northern Ireland aged 65 years or over will increase by 63 per cent (OFMDFM, 2014). In 2003 and 2008, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey incorporated questions focusing on attitudes and experiences of ageing and ageism – see Evason (2004) and Gray (2009). Since then, several key developments have taken place.

Firstly, the post of Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland was established, following a strong campaign from older people. Claire Keatinge was appointed as the first Commissioner in 2011, and her role involves championing the rights and interests of older people throughout Northern Ireland.

Secondly, a draft *Active Ageing Strategy, 2014-2020* was published in 2014 (OFMDFM, 2014a). The overall vision of that strategy is for Northern Ireland to become an age-friendly region in which people, as they get older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential, with their rights and dignity protected. The strategic aims of this strategy are based upon the UN Principles for Older Persons. These 18 principles are grouped into five themes: independence,



participation, care, self-fulfilment, and dignity. The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland is legally obliged to have regard to these principles.

Thirdly, in 2012, Belfast started the process of becoming an age-friendly city. The global Age-Friendly movement has been led by the World Health Organization (see <http://agefriendlyworld.org/en/>). To become age friendly, a city or region must enable people of all ages to participate in their local communities (Gray *et al.*, 2014). There are many challenges to becoming an age-friendly city: poorly-designed housing, lack of public transportation, and places to meet and socialise for free. To make the changes needed to become an age-friendly city, a place must first challenge how we think about ageing, and the value of having older people as active participants in our communities.

It is time to see whether these changes, and the speed of growth of older age groups in our communities, have impacted on our attitudes. Thus, the 2014 NILT survey repeated many of the themes asked in earlier years, as well as introducing new questions to reflect recent policy developments. This Research Update explores several of these key themes, and where possible, comparisons are made with the 2003 and 2008 findings.

### How old is old?

Demographic and policy changes over the past decade have resulted in changing perceptions of when in the life course old age begins. In 2014, when asked at what age they start to think of someone as an 'older person', NILT responses ranged from 30 to 100 years, with an average of

69 years. There was some variation by age, with an average of 63 years among the youngest respondents (aged 18-24 years), compared with 72 years for those aged 65 years or over. So, it seems that perceptions of when old age begins is linked to the age of respondents.

## Respect for elders

When asked if they think that older people are, on the whole, treated better or worse than people in the general population because of their age, NILT respondents had mixed views. Figure 1 suggests that one fifth of people (22%) thought that older people are treated better than others. Whilst this is a small minority, nevertheless, it is twice the proportion that thought this in 2003 (11%). Looking again at the 2014 data, similar proportions thought that older people are treated the same as (36%), or worse than (37%), the general population.

There are some differences according to age group, with those aged 45-54 years being most likely to think that older people are treated worse (46%), whilst people aged 75 years or over are the group most likely to think that older people are treated better (28%) than others.

Nearly four out of ten respondents (37%) thought that, as they get older, they find that people treat them with more respect. A similar proportion (39%) said that people treated them about the same, whilst around one in five (22%) thought that people treated them with less respect. Table 1 shows a rise in the proportion saying 'more' respect since 2003. At that time, only one quarter (24%) of people felt that they were treated with more respect, whilst 36 per cent felt that they were treated with less respect.

Looking at the responses among different age groups suggests that people in mid-life

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?

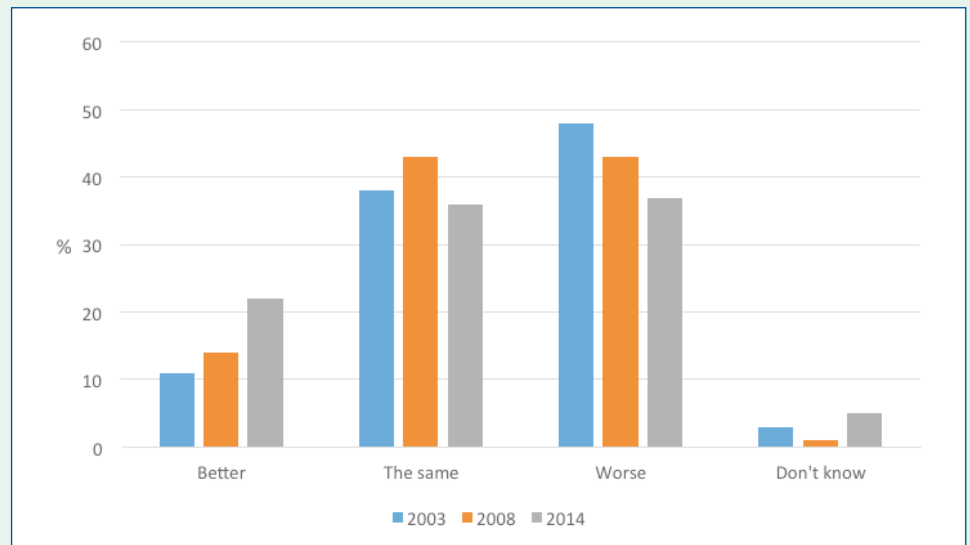


Table 1: Perception of being treated with more respect

	%		
	2003	2008	2014
More respect	24	35	37
Less respect	36	27	22
(About the same)	37	38	39
(Don't know)	3	0	3

are experiencing, or are more aware, of negative treatment. In 2014, just over one half (56%) of those aged 18-24 years said that they were treated with more respect as they get older, as did four out of ten (39%) of those aged 75 years or over. However, only 25 per cent of those aged 45-54 years said this.

## Solidarity between generations?

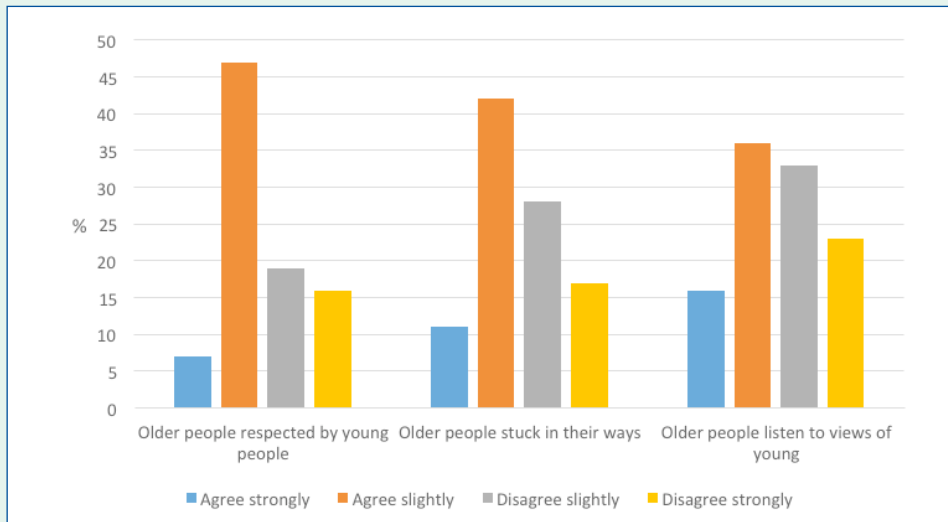
Figure 2 displays the responses to questions designed to measure inter-generational solidarity. A slight majority (54%) of people taking part in the 2014 survey thought that older people are admired and respected by young people, and this is double the proportion feeling this in 2003 (27%). The data from 2014 indicate that opinions varied according to age: whilst 70 per cent of 18-24 years olds agreed with this statement to some degree, only 54 per cent of those aged 65

years or over thought this. However, the groups least likely to agree are those aged 35-44 years, and those aged 45-54 years (both at 47%).

Even though Table 1 indicates a rise in the proportion of respondents thinking that they are treated with more respect as they get older, there is still a perception that older people are too set in their ways. Approximately one half of respondents (53%) in 2014 thought that older people are too set in their ways and ideas, and this is similar to the figure in 2003 (56%). In 2014, the group most likely to agree with this statement are those aged 25-34 (60%), followed by those aged 65-74 (57%). In contrast, the group least likely to think this are those aged 35-44 years (43%).

Opinions were split over whether older people are not willing to listen to young people's views, with a slight majority (56%) disagreeing with it. These are very similar to the figures for 2003 and 2008. There was variation according to age, with one half of the youngest age group agreeing to some extent, whilst the group least likely to agree are those aged 35-44 (35%), followed by those aged 75 years or over (36%).

Figure 2: Inter-generational solidarity



Research from the Republic of Ireland has reported high levels of solidarity towards older people (Timonen *et al.*, 2013). More research is needed (as is more time as the proportion of the population aged over 65 grows), to determine whether there is generational ambivalence, conflict or solidarity in Northern Ireland.

## Crisis or opportunity?

There has been much focus by the media about the negative aspects of population ageing, such as the potential for a pensions 'crisis'. However, there has been less publicity about the positive contribution and opportunities presented by population ageing. A report by the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland estimated that people aged 60 or over in Northern Ireland will contribute almost £25 billion to the economy over the next 50 years through volunteering, caring, childcare, replacement parenting and working (COPNI, 2014). Reflecting this, there was a strong sense among 2014 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%).

As people live longer, one solution to the predicted pensions crisis is to delay retirement until aged 70 or even older. People are working for more years than before, reflecting legislative changes brought about by longer life expectancy, such as the abolition of the statutory retirement age in the United Kingdom in 2011. Alongside this, the age for eligibility for state pension has been rising. Public opinion reflects these changes, with four out of five NILT respondents (81%) thinking that people should be allowed to work for as long as they want to and are able to. There is little variation according to age group.

## A good place to be old?

A number of questions within the 2014 Life and Times Survey were developed to reflect some key messages within the *Active Ageing Strategy* document. The figures in Table 2 can help us decide if Northern Ireland is a good place to be old, and they suggest that responses are mixed. Six out of ten felt that older people had equal access to health care (62%), and equal access to social care if needed (57%). In terms of being valued, or having rights or dignity upheld, just about one half of respondents agreed to some degree. However, that is not to say that respondents disagreed with the statements – responses tended to be evenly split between 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'disagree'.

Looking at these results by age group provides an interesting pattern. For all five statements, respondents aged 75 years or older are the age group most likely to express some level of agreement with them. Conversely, respondents aged 45-54 are least likely to support these statements. Perhaps this group of respondents are the group most likely

Table 2: Agreement with Active Ageing messages

	%			
	Agree/strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree/strongly disagree	Don't know
Older people have equal access to health care	62	16	20	2
Older people have good access to social care if needed	56	20	20	4
Older people are valued	53	22	24	2
The rights of older people are upheld	50	20	27	5
The dignity of older people is upheld	48	21	28	4

to be providing care for their parents, family or friends? We know that family solidarity is strong in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the experience of having to access health and social care for a frail parent suggests that there is less respect for older people as service users than one might expect. Equally, older people receiving care may be protected from some of the difficulties of accessing care by adult children working on their behalf to access care.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that the jury is out on whether Northern Ireland is a good place to grow old. A slight majority think that older people have appropriate access to health or social care. However, the fact that there is room for improvement in how we treat older people is hinted at by the dissatisfaction expressed by many respondents in middle age. It is impossible to tell whether this dissatisfaction will mellow (with age), or will grow as new generations enter old age with fewer

economic resources and tighter access to health and social care.

In conclusion, Northern Ireland's policy makers have taken some steps which could make Northern Ireland a good place to grow old. Initiatives underway such as making Northern Ireland's capital city age-friendly and appointing a Commissioner for Older People are to be welcomed. However, if policy changes are to keep pace with the accelerated rate at which our population is ageing, more must be done, and soon. Living a long life is something to be celebrated and enjoyed. When good policy planning is in place to deal with new demographics, an older population continues to be a healthy, stable and hard-working one.

## References

Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI), 2014, *Appreciating Age: Valuing the positive contributions made by older people in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: COPNI

Evason, Eileen, 2004, *Ageing Well*, ARK Research Update 31

Gray, Ann Marie, 2009, *All our futures: attitudes to age and ageing in Northern Ireland*, ARK Research Update 61

Gray, Ann Marie, Devine, Paula, Titterington, Vicki, Johnston, Lynn and Henkin, Nancy (2014) *Collaborating Towards an Age-Friendly Northern Ireland*, Belfast: ARK

OFMDFM (2014) *A profile of older people in Northern Ireland – 2014 update*, Belfast: OFMDFM

OFMDFM (2014a) *Active Ageing Strategy 2014-20. Consultation Document*, Belfast: OFMDFM

Timonen, V., Conlon, C., Scharf, T. and Carney, G. (2013) 'Family, State and Class: Reconceptualizing intergenerational solidarity using the grounded theory approach', *European Journal of Ageing*, 9: 171-179

Paula Devine is Coordinator of the ARK Ageing Programme, and is based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

Gemma M Carney is a lecturer in Social Policy, in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

The questions on ageing and ageism were funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

For more information on the survey, visit [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)

Photo by Brian Morrison, and used with permission of Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts and Older People Programme.

## Key points

- 22% of respondents think that older people are treated better than others, compared with 11% in 2003; 37% think this group are treated worse than others.
- 54% of people taking part in NILT think that older people are admired and respected by young people, compared with 27% in 2003.
- 53% of respondents think that older people are too set in their ways and ideas,
- 81% of NILT respondents think that people should be allowed to work for as long as they want to and are able to.
- 62% think that older people have equal access to health care, and 57% think older people have equal access to social care if needed.

### In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

Magee campus, Ulster University  
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA  
Tel: 028 7167 5513 Fax: 028 7167 5510  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 3943  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)