



Research Update

All our futures: attitudes to age and ageing in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey last monitored attitudes to age and ageing five years ago in 2003. In the intervening period policy developments included the publication of a Strategy for Older People (OFMDFM, 2005), the introduction of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) in 2006 and, in November 2008, an Older Person's advocate was appointed. There is ongoing discussion about the introduction of a Commissioner for Older People and the nature and extent of the powers which should be linked to that office. The appointment of an older person's advocate and the publication of an older person's strategy



is part of government's response to long-standing concerns about the rights and participation of older people. The strategy focuses on the need for older people to have choice and control, the need to strengthen the network of financial support available to them and the importance of healthy ageing. Yet progress on these issues is not without its critics.

Northern Ireland has been described as having 'the most disjointed and limited approach to ageing issues' in the UK by Trench and Jeffrey, 2007, p.24 who noted the degree to which responsibilities are spread across departments.

The 2008 NILT survey has yielded a great deal of useful data on the position of older people in our society, representation of

older people, adequacy of provision, and public attitudes towards age and ageing. This research update focuses on the change in public perceptions between 2003 and 2008 in how older people are respected and treated, specifically in relation to healthcare provision, availability of financial services and employment opportunities. It also looks at perceptions of how well older people are represented by authorities and politicians and whether there is support for a body to champion the rights of older people.

Who is an ‘older person’?

When the Life and Times Survey was carried out in 2003 there was a general consensus around that time that the age of 50 should be the cut-off point for defining an ‘older person’. Despite the fact that many policymakers, researchers and indeed respondents found this age cut-off somewhat arbitrary, that demarcation has persisted to some extent in the policy planning and

research literature. For the 2008 survey we asked respondents themselves at what age they started to think of someone as an ‘older person’. Interestingly, only 4% of respondents would define people in their fifties as ‘older’ but 20% opted for people aged 60 to 64, and 57% for the 65 to 75 age range. A few respondents refused to classify people as ‘older’ until they were into their nineties. For the purposes of this paper we have accepted the respondents’ views and have tended to provide breakdowns of results for those aged 65 and over. For some questions, where comparisons are made with the 2003 survey, we have retained the 50+ demarcation.

General views on the position of older people

General views on the position of older people in society have changed in the five years since 2003. For the population as a whole, there is a sense that things may be slightly better for older people in terms of

the respect in which they are held. The survey asked respondents

‘As you get older, do you find that people treat you with more respect or less respect?’

The proportion of people who feel that they are treated with less respect has fallen since 2003 from 36% to 27%. Perhaps more interestingly, the fall has been even more marked among the 65+ age group where those saying that they are treated with less respect has fallen 15 percentage points from 37% to 24%.

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

	2003	2008
	%	%
% saying ‘less respect’		
Respondents aged under 65	36	27
Respondents aged 65 or more	37	24
All	36	27

This finding is reinforced by results from another question

‘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?’

Again the results would suggest that things have got rather better for older people. The proportion of people who say that older people are treated ‘worse’ has fallen slightly from 48% in 2003 to 43% in 2008. Not a marked drop, but again it is more significant among the 65+ age group where the proportion feeling that older people are treated worse has dropped from 42% to 36%.

Yet what exactly are these questions measuring? Like

Table 2: 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?

	2003	2008
	%	%
% saying ‘worse’		
Respondents aged under 65	50	44
Respondents aged 65 or more	42	36
All	48	43

many attitude questions these items are aimed at tapping into a vague and general sense of ‘how things are’ and the fact that things look fairly positive is perhaps consistent with the raising of awareness of older people’s issues, the increasing visibility of older people’s groups, perhaps better representation, and a sense that people in general are more alert to the existence of ageism. However when the survey questions begin to pin respondents down to the specifics of actions and behaviours among professions and institutions. the picture changes. As table 3 indicates, a very large proportion of the population (76%) still feels that the authorities in Northern Ireland are not doing all they should for older people. This was the case in 2003 and it remains the case in 2008, and there is even a slight increase on the 2003 figure. Interestingly, the rise since 2003 is not driven by the opinions of older people themselves (where the figures are largely unchanged), it is driven by the views of younger people.

Table 3: Do you think that the authorities in Northern Ireland do all they should for older people, do too much, or do not do enough?

	2003	2008
	%	%
% saying ‘do not do enough’		
Respondents aged under 65	72	79
Respondents aged 65 or more	65	64
All	71	76

The sense that things may be better in terms of attitudes towards and respect for older people but worse in terms of perceived failings on the ground is reinforced by the findings on perceptions of specific discrimination.

Perceptions of unfairness

Respondents were asked about whether one of their own friends or family members had ever been treated unfairly by health, social care or medical professionals or by the financial sector or an employer. The last is particularly interesting. When the 2003 survey was conducted the thrust of government policy was focused on increasing the labour market participation

of older people by encouraging them to remain in employment up to and beyond retirement age. Since 2003, legislative measures have been introduced to give older people more protection against ageism. This includes the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 which makes discrimination in employment illegal in terms of age. This legislation introduced a national default retirement age of 65 but gave employees a new right to request to continue working. However, it is not obligatory for employers to agree and they have the right to set criteria on which decisions will be based. We need to be mindful also that in 2008 the economic picture was very different from that pertaining in 2003 with growing unemployment and competition for jobs.

Table 4 shows that the perception of instances of discrimination has increased across all of these areas between 2003 and 2008. Cases where people feel that friends or family members have been treated with less dignity

Table 4: Perceptions of unfair treatment of family and friends

	2003			2008		
	<65	65+	All	<65	65+	All
All respondents who felt that a friend or family member was:						
Treated with less dignity and respect by people in the health and social care professions because of their age	27	13	24	35	14	31
Not offered medical treatment that might have helped because of their age	20	10	18	29	12	26
Not treated as well as they might have been by people in the financial sector because of their age	12	4	11	24	13	22
Not treated as well as they might have been by an employer because of their age	10	4	9	22	9	20

and respect by health and social care professionals still tops the list in 2008, as it did in 2003. Nearly a third of people felt that a friend or family member had been treated with less dignity and respect compared with a quarter five years earlier. However the greatest increases are in relation to treatment by employers and people in the financial sector where rates have doubled (albeit from quite a low base). Only one in ten people felt that a family member or friend had been treated badly by an employer in 2003 but this had risen to one in five by 2008.

What is impossible to answer from a survey of this nature is whether these rising perceptions of unfairness reflect a real increase in ageism in

these areas, or whether they reflect a growing sensitivity to the issues. If it is the latter, then instances which would not have been noticed or defined as ageism five years previously may now be registered by people as such. It is telling that there is a clear disparity between the results for people aged under 65 and those who are older.

There is virtually no change in the proportion of the over 65s in terms of the ageism that they observe suffered by family and friends in relation to medical and social care, yet one might expect the rates to be much higher here simply because they are more likely to have friends who are in that age group. There is however a slight increase in problems in the

employment and financial sectors. But overall the proportions of older people reporting problems remain quite small and much smaller than those perceived by younger age groups. The 2003 survey did identify an 'angry generation' of people in their middle years – perhaps feeling squeezed financially or carers themselves who have a heightened awareness of the difficulties facing older people who were much more prepared than their older counterparts to point the finger at failings in provisions.

Among respondents themselves aged 50 or over, there are relatively few reports of incidences of unfairness or discrimination. In the case of health, social care and medical professions, these levels have remained steady since 2003. Again, the employment and financial sectors do not appear to fare so well but in statistical terms the increased reporting of unfair treatment is very slight. In very broad terms, around one in ten respondents aged 50 or over reported unfair

Table 5: Prevalence of unfair treatment of respondents themselves aged 50+

	2003	2008
	%	%
Respondents aged 50 or over who:		
Felt treated with less dignity and respect by people in the health and social care professions because of their age	11	12
Felt that they were not offered medical treatment that might have helped because of their age	8	9
Felt that they were not treated as well as they might have been people by people in the financial sector because of their age	8	13
Felt that they were not treated as well as they might have been by an employer because of their age	6	10

treatment in each of these areas.

Respondents were further questioned about the behaviour of health and social care professionals in terms of their attitudes to older people, the treatment of their illnesses and their priorities in terms of waiting lists for tests and operations. Here there is a much higher level of concern among the over 65s than we have noted in any other question, but again there is no consistent

increase in those concerns since 2003. So while a full 42% of older people in 2003 felt that they were disadvantaged with regard to waiting lists, this has actually dropped very slightly to 39% in 2008. These figures are still very high for an age group that seems to be characterised more for its content than discontent but there is no evidence for a significant downturn in treatment since 2003. On the other hand the results for people aged under 65

Table 6: How health and social care workers treat older people

	2003			2008		
	<65	65+	All	<65	65+	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Do you think that health and social care workers treat older people differently with regard to:						
Their attitudes to them?	44	36	42	62	38	57
The treatment of their illness?	44	33	42	57	38	53
Placing them on waiting lists for tests and operations	47	42	46	54	39	51

are much more marked. While 44% of this group in 2003 saw a problem with the attitudes to older people among health care professionals, this has risen 18 percentage points to 62% by 2008. Perceived ageism in the treatment of illnesses had risen 13 percentage points.

Clearly there are big changes in perceived unfairness between 2003 and 2008 but whether these changes can be attributed to an actual increase in discrimination is a moot point.

Adequacy of representation

In 2008 we asked about the representation of older people by local politicians. On this issue the majority (54%) felt that representation was not adequate. Of interest also is the sizeable number (21%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In their responses to this question those over 65 were just as likely as other groups to express a high level of discontent.

The perceived failure of politicians to adequately

represent older people may account in part for the large number of respondents supporting the idea of an independent body, outside government, to champion the needs and rights of older people. As table 7 shows there was strong support across the age groups, although interestingly it was the 45-59 year olds rather than the over 65s who were most likely to say older people needed such a body. Nevertheless it does appear to provide endorsement for the idea of a Commissioner for Older People.

Table 7: Older people are adequately represented by Northern Ireland politicians

	<65	65+	All
	%	%	%
Agree	22	27	23
Disagree	55	55	55

Table 8: What older people need is an independent body outside government that champions the needs and rights of older people

	<65	65+	All
	%	%	%
Agree	82	79	81
Disagree	7	9	8

Problems facing older people

We asked people to identify what they thought were the biggest problems facing older people. These are listed below in Table 9, ranked in order of those most often cited by respondents in the 2008 survey. Where possible, 2003 responses are included.

Table 9: Main problems facing older people in Northern Ireland today (in rank order)

2003	2008
Fear of Crime	Fear of Crime
Loneliness	Keeping Warm in Winter
Making Ends Meet	Making Ends Meet
Keeping Warm in Winter	Loneliness
Access to Healthcare	Lack of Respect
Lack of Respect	Access to Healthcare

The fear of crime continues to be identified as the biggest problem facing older people although fewer people identified this issue than was the case in 2003. However, it was the problem most commonly cited across the age groups. Significantly more people saw keeping warm in

winter as a major concern than in 2003, probably a reflection of growing fuel costs prior to and at the time the survey was being conducted. The problem of making ends meet ranked highly, as it did in 2003. This concern about financial well-being was reinforced in responses to other questions about financial provision for pensioners. In 2008 87% of respondents said the state pension is a poor deal, a slight increase on the 85% who thought this was the case in 2003, and 79% of people felt that financial provision by the state for pensioners generally was inadequate, a similar response to that expressed in 2003. There was a consensus across the age groups with regard to some of the problems, namely, the fear of crime, making ends meet, access to health care and boredom but there are also some interesting differences in opinion between age groups. People in the 30-44 age group appear to be the most anxious, closely followed by those aged 45-59. On a number of issues respondents over 60

were less likely than other age groups to see these as problematic. This included transport, lack of respect, access to suitable housing, access to healthcare and access to employment.

Conclusion

There is some indication in these findings of an improving picture in terms of how older people are perceived and respected in society generally. However, analysis of respondents' perceptions of how their own older family and friends are treated shows that they think unfair treatment and discrimination has increased, particularly with regard to employment. What is also noteworthy is that among older people themselves reported experiences of unfair or unequal treatment are relatively low. Those most likely to be pessimistic in their attitudes are the 44-59 year olds. In 2003 we noted the strength of feeling of this 'angry generation' and this group continues to be more likely to perceive discrimination and perhaps be more willing to be point to

the failings of bodies and institutions to address problems. However, this is of course a hugely diverse group and factors such as income, social class and personal responsibilities are likely to influence individual responses.

The consensus that not enough is being done by Northern Ireland bodies and political representatives to address the needs of older people poses challenges for the devolved administration and NGOs. Legislative attempts to protect against age discrimination include the new age regulation introduced in 2006. While this provides some protection with regard to discrimination in employment the provision of goods, services and facilities is excluded from the regulations thereby leaving significant issues unaddressed.

Key Points

- There is some indication that things have got better for older people since 2003. Fewer people reported feeling they are treated with less respect because of their age and there has been a small reduction in the number of respondents who feel that older people are treated worse than the general population because of their age. Those over 65 are the most likely to have identified an improvement.
- Respondents felt that the older people are more likely to be discriminated against in relation to healthcare, financial services and especially employment than in 2003.
- There was a strong view that authorities in Northern Ireland do not do all they should for older people and that older people are not adequately represented by Northern Ireland politicians.
- 81% of respondents felt that there should be an independent body outside government to champion the views of older people

References

OFMDFM (2005) Ageing in an Inclusive Society. Belfast: OFMDFM

Trench, A and Jeffrey, C (2007) Older People and Public Policy: the impact of devolution. London: Age Concern

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