



Future of an Ageing Population: Expert Roundtable

Belfast
23rd March 2016

Context

As part of the evidence gathering for the Foresight Project on the Future of an Ageing Population, Sir Mark Walport and the Lead Expert Group undertook a programme of visits around the United Kingdom. The final of these visits was to Northern Ireland on the 23rd March 2016. This roundtable meeting was held in Belfast and organised in partnership with the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. Annex A contains the full attendee list.

Meeting

At a roundtable meeting, Professor Tom Kirkwood, Professor Jeremy Myerson, and Mrs Mary Sinfield discussed with local leaders and experts the key challenges, opportunities and vision for the future of an ageing population in Northern Ireland.

Professor Roger O'Sullivan from the Institute of Public Health in Ireland opened the meeting by welcoming the group before handing over to Professor Jeremy Myerson who gave an overview of the project. The meeting was chaired by Professor Tom Kirkwood, and closed by Mrs Mary Sinfield.

Discussion

Conversation covered three broad issues at the meeting. Below is a summary of the main points of discussion.

Demography, Inequalities and Health in Northern Ireland

- There are particular patterns that are notably different for Northern Ireland, as compared to the rest of the UK. For example in Northern Ireland families are larger, and there is a history of higher levels of chronic joblessness. Additionally infrastructure is different – for example health and social care services are combined.
- There are a higher proportion of carers in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK, possibly because of the emphasis on the importance of family in Northern Ireland. Supply and demand of care is also influenced by cultural factors, however¹.
- The self-reported long-term illness levels of the over 50s in Northern Ireland are approximately double those in the Republic of Ireland. This could be due to differences in self-reporting, and there is the possibility that health (or the reporting of it) is affected by legacy of The Troubles. This is an area of ongoing research.
- Long-term health problems, including diabetes and co-morbidities have an effect on employment levels. A good deal of unemployment in Northern Ireland can be

¹ Shaw, M. and Dorling, D. (2004) Who cares in England and Wales? The Positive Care Law: cross-sectional study British Journal of General Practice 64 899-903 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1326106/>

attributed to poor health, and this interplay between poor health and unemployment can widen inequalities.

- More younger people are moving from Northern Ireland than to Northern Ireland, further increasing the average age of the population.

Public health interventions for an ageing population, and specific insights from Northern Ireland

- Age friendly communities were discussed. A Belfast-based initiative to promote exercise in a regenerated green space was brought up, and thought to be generally effective. Experts found, however, that older people identified the social aspect as the primary reason for “getting out and about” – they were not exercising for the sake of just their health.
- It was perceived that the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland has a prominent voice on ageing issues. For example, there is a regional Pensioners Parliament in Northern Ireland.
- Current levels of funding to devolved administrations from the UK Government are not calculated strictly on basis of need, with a feeling that regional morbidity should be a factor in calculations. (Health-related costs differ significantly between UK regions.)

Housing needs, the built environment and an Age Friendly Northern Ireland

- There is a pronounced geographical “spatial re-sorting” phenomenon in Northern Ireland where it was noted that older people are leaving cities for the coast or suburbs, and younger people are gravitating towards cities. There was also a feeling that cities are planned for youth, particularly students, to a greater extent than for older people.
- The distinction between rural and urban areas in Northern Ireland is defined differently to other countries – there are large areas where people live fairly dispersed throughout the countryside. It was recognised that serving the care needs of a spread out population require different approaches than those suitable in urban areas because of the distances and time taken for carers to travel between patients.
- Encouraging people to “downsize” or “rightsize” is difficult in Northern Ireland – as with many other parts of the UK, people often prefer to age in place and housing options are limited across NI. This can be a particular problem if people do not have access to a car as public transport in suburban and rural areas does not fill the same needs as a car can provide.

Annex A – Attendee List

Professor Tom Kirkwood (chair)	Associate Dean for Ageing, Newcastle University, and Professor of Biological Gerontology, University of Copenhagen, and Member of FoAP Project's Lead Expert Group
Professor Jeremy Myerson	Helen Hamlyn Chair of Design, Royal College of Art, Professor of Design, and Member of FoAP Project's Lead Expert Group
Mary Sinfield	Former Chair of the New Dynamics of Ageing Older People's Reference Group, and Member of FoAP Project's Lead Expert Group
Professor Roger O'Sullivan	Director of the Ageing Research and Development Division at the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, and meeting host
Emer Boyle	Head of Legal and Policy Advice with the office of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI)
Dr Paula Devine	Deputy Director of ARK (a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University with the aim of making social science information widely accessible)
Duane Farrell	Charity Director, responsible for Age NI's services, policy and engagement and development support
Professor Frank Kee	Clinical Professor, Director of UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health Research (NI), Deputy Director of the Centre for Public Health in Queen's University Belfast, and Chair of the Scientific Steering Committee of NICOLA
Paul McGill	Public Health Development Officer with the Ageing Research and Development Division of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH)
Dr Brendan Murtagh	Chartered Town Planner and Reader in the School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering at Queens University Belfast
Dr Dermot O'Reilly	UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health NI. Lead for the Administrative Data Research Centre (ADRC) in Northern Ireland
Professor Chris Paris	Research Fellow in the Centre for Housing, Urban and Regional Planning, University of Adelaide and Emeritus Professor of Housing Studies, Ulster University
Dr Mark Tully	Lecturer in Physical Activity and Public Health, Queen's University Belfast
Dr Tom Wells	Government Office for Science
Jessica Lawrence	Government Office for Science