

Supplementary written evidence submitted by Independent Age [ROP0063]

I'm writing to thank you for your time at the engagement event we ran with the Women and Equalities Committee in Andover on 18th March. I hope being able to speak directly to older people on the issue of digital exclusion was beneficial to your Committee's inquiry on the rights of older people.

I'm also writing to follow up on your question during the session on whether a Minister, or a Commissioner, would be the better champion for the rights of older people. As you know from Independent Age's written and oral evidence, we believe that establishing a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing is the best way to do this.

There are two key benefits that we believe a Commissioner role would have over a new Ministerial post. Firstly, a Commissioner is a long term solution, and could provide continuity across different administrations. This would protect the role being lost in reshuffles.

Secondly, a Commissioner would be independent, with a core role to amplify the voices of older people and collate their experience to inform policy development. This differs to the roles and responsibilities of a Minister, who may well have other priorities in their brief. Too often Government departments can work in silos; a Commissioner could improve this by convening stakeholders across Government and further afield, to work together on solutions that would improve the lives of older people.

In terms of effectiveness, the current Older People's Commissioners in Wales and Northern Ireland have had wide ranging successes, even without the powers of a Minister. For example, the Older People's Commissioner in Wales has been successful in improving Pension Credit take-up. As well as calling on the Welsh Government and the UK Government to do more to increase take-up, the Commissioner reached out directly to older people and provided practical information through a flyer that went out with the renewed bus passes. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions showed that the number of new Pension Credit claimants in Wales was 26% higher during this period compared with the average per quarter over the previous two years.

In addition, in Northern Ireland the Older People's Commissioner was instrumental in promoting the Make the Call campaign, which connects individuals to benefits advisers who provide a full assessment of their entitlements. The Commissioner worked closely with the Department for Communities, and carers and older people were key groups targeted in promotion activity. It was key that the Commissioner was independent, and one step removed from the Department for Communities, giving older people reassurance this was a service they could trust. In October 2023 the Government of Northern Ireland announced that during 2023, the Make the Call wraparound service supported 11,700 people to access entitlements they had not been claiming and who, on average, are now £90 per week better off. In 2022/23 an additional £54.9 million of benefits were claimed. An examination into the impact of the Make the Call service has been produced through the Department for Communities Economic and Social Research Programme which found the service had a comprehensive reach, particularly with those in the older age groups.

As I said at our session, if we had the opportunity both a Commissioner and a Minister to be introduced, that would be optimal. But to achieve our ultimate aim - that the rights of older people are better represented in government - we believe that a Commissioner for Older People and Ageing for England is the best way to achieve this.

If you have the opportunity, I would strongly recommend meeting Helena Herklots, the Commissioner for Wales, whose term comes to an end this August. She of course gave evidence to the committee, but I am sure you would get value from a one on one meeting with her, and I'd be very happy to broker this if you thought it useful.

We remain keen to continue supporting your Committee's work and we would be happy to help in any other way we can.

Best wishes,

Joanna Elson

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