



***Sinn Féin - Rights for All
A Charter for Senior Citizens***

A Sinn Féin policy document - June 2004
www.sinnfein.ie

Sinn Fein - Rights for All

A Charter for Senior Citizens

Social Inclusion

Sinn Féin believes that creating the conditions for an equal society means recognising that many diverse groups need enhanced protection from the state.

Sinn Féin recognises that senior citizens have made a lifetime contribution to our society through their work, their taxes and voluntary work in their communities but the standard of living of many of our senior citizens does not meet their needs or reflect the contribution they make.

Poverty has no place in our society yet the incomes of many senior citizens are falling radically behind that of society as a whole. Our senior citizens, many of whom have been forced to retire, are living on inadequate pensions and struggling with spiraling costs of living. They also have to battle against society's attitudes towards those marginalised, particularly as a result of low income.

It is vital that mechanisms are developed to properly value and recognise the lifelong contribution of our senior citizens to society as a whole and to social cohesion.

While senior citizens have concerns and needs particular to their personal circumstances their concern is also for society as a whole. The quality of life for their children and grandchildren, for the following generations, is as important to them as their own welfare.

Sinn Féin believes that we need to support senior citizens in realising their vital role in our communities - we are all the losers without their contribution. This means addressing issues such as low income, access to transport, health, education and housing and ensuring that the voices of senior citizens are heard.

Living in safety

Increasingly sheltered accommodation and complexes for senior citizens are clustered away from the wider community creating isolation and difficulties in full participation in our communities. This isolation, especially in rural areas, also helps foster vulnerability or a sense of vulnerability. We need to see:

- A better mix in new build public housing developments
- The design of new public housing to embrace the concept of life-long living
- The implementation of measures to enable elderly people to continue living in their own home where this is their preference
- The design of street lighting and roads must prioritise a safer environment
- Proper security and upkeep of local authority housing complexes for the elderly.

Making resources available to improve security in the homes of senior citizens improves both safety and the sense of security. However, such measures only deal with the symptoms. They are not a cure for the problem of increasing attacks on the elderly. Turning homes into fortresses is not a long-term solution to

the problem of isolation, alienation or vulnerability. Resources and actions need to be targeted to support communities in challenging the violence of those who target our senior citizens and a coordinated practical plan to encourage senior citizens to lead an active life needs to be a central element in combating social exclusion. It is essential that there is a consultation process with Senior Citizens on all issues pertaining to their and their wider community's welfare.

Education

The education system must have mechanisms for young people to recognise at an early stage the value and experience of senior citizens. Legislators and education providers should ensure that the concept of lifelong learning becomes a reality.

Transport

Senior citizens are at greater risk of suffering from social isolation so it is essential that they have access to accessible, safe transport. They are major users of public transport as many do not have access to a car. The planning of all aspects of transportation should ensure that barriers to accessing services, employment and volunteering, educational, recreational and social opportunities are removed.

To enhance the social inclusion, Sinn Féin calls for:

- Extension of free public transport for pensioners throughout the island
- Easier access to the Government subsidised Rural Transport Initiative, which is vital for the survival and well being of people in rural communities
- Voucher scheme to allow older people entitled to free public transport to avail of private transport where there is no adequate public transport system.

A voice in decision-making

Ministerial responsibility that specifically deals with the rights and entitlements of senior citizens - that drives strategy and decision-making and can take action across all departments, must put the rights of the senior citizen at the heart of decision making. It would also create a mechanism for direct democratic responsibility and accountability. A cross-departmental working group can effectively deal with the many crosscutting issues that affect our senior citizens.

Ending poverty

There are almost 500,000 people over 65 living in this state and according to figures released in 2000 43.3% of them were living below the 60% income poverty line. Last December's increase of 10 Euro in the old age pension by the government is totally inadequate. On top of this we have the second highest seasonal variation in mortality in Europe, with suggestions that fuel poverty could be a factor in as many as 2000 winter deaths each year and among the worst affected by fuel poverty are older people living alone. Sinn Féin proposes

- Linking old age pensioners' social insurance contributions to inflation to ensure a sufficient standard of living
- Retrospective pension credits for those who spent their working lives caring for others
- New legislation on age discrimination resulting from the EU directive on equal treatment that will come into force by 2006 must also address the rights of senior citizens
- Statutory funding for voluntary agencies such as Meals on Wheels

Service Provision

Many of the issues that must be addressed in promoting social inclusion are related to the provision of quality services and to accessing quality services. This state has the lowest spend on social services in Europe. In 1999 for the EU as a whole spending on social services amounted to 27.5% of GDP, while in this state the figures was 14.5% of GDP. Equal access has to be given to senior citizens in all areas of life. Facilities must be provided to encourage the use of banks, post offices, all health facilities and all public offices, bus stops and railway stations, including more seating and better lighting. Access to services and facilities must be improved, pedestrian crossings should allow a longer time for crossing and improvements in maintenance of pavements should be prioritized including, when necessary, the clearing of ice and snow. Lowering speed limits in residential areas may also contribute to safety.

The provision of quality services includes indirect services such as research. More money invested in research into the prevention and cure of Alzheimer's and dementia could both create substantial savings in the cost of caring for sufferers and relieve huge levels of trauma faced by senior citizens, their families and friends.

Well resourced health care for older people must be a priority. Sinn Féin will:

- Campaign for an end to the two tier health system
- Support the retention and further development of the maximum range of services at local hospitals and the provision of quality hospital care for all, regardless of income or geographic location
- Demand restoration of services to those hospitals where units such as A&E have been closed down.
- Press for the delivery of promised primary care services
- Extension of medical card eligibility to all those over 65
- Funding to health boards to restore all Home Help hours cut back in 2002/2003

Recognition of Care Work

The needs of carers must be addressed and funding must be made available for appropriate support, including day care provision, respite care and domestic aids. We commend the Carers' Association for providing a loud and strong voice for tens of thousands of fulltime, and many more part-time carers. The issue has been placed higher on the political agenda than ever before. Carers must be recognised for the work that they do. Their work saves the State incalculable amounts of money. Sinn Féin calls for:

- The abolition of the means test for full-time carers
- Replacement of the present Carer's Allowance with an expanded payment scheme that properly recognises the value of carers' work
- The modification of the social welfare system to give recognition for benefits to those who have worked in the home
- Increase the Carers Allowance to the same rate as that provided to Foster Carers

Sinn Féin main recommendations

- Linking old age pensioners' social insurance contributions to inflation to ensure a sufficient standard of living
- Retrospective pension credits for those who spent their working lives caring for others
- The abolition of the means test for full-time carers
- Well resourced health care for older people must be a priority
- Extension of free public transport for pensioners throughout the island
- A better mix in new build public housing developments
- Easier access to the Government subsidised Rural Transport Initiative, which is vital for the survival and well being of people in rural communities
- Year on year targets to eliminate unnecessary deaths from cold
- Design of streets and roads should ensure a safe environment for senior citizens
- An adequate level of nursing care in residential accommodation
- Extension of resources available for home security
- More resources for community based initiatives that promote social inclusion