

## Attitudes of the General Public in Northern Ireland towards Age-related Issues.

March 2008

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland appointed Social and Market Research (SMR) to conduct a survey of the general public in Northern Ireland regarding age-related issues and attitudes. This update provides a summary of the key findings of the research.

### In Brief ...

- Just under half (46%) of respondents were aware that age discrimination is now unlawful.
- Two-thirds (66%) of those who were aware of the new law correctly indicated that job applicants and employees are covered by the Regulations, while fewer correctly cited contract workers (13%) and employment agencies (10%).
- There was strong disapproval of the exclusion of goods, facilities and services from the Regulations (45%). Only 9% approved of the exclusion.
- A difficulty in obtaining employment was perceived to be the main work-related issue facing both younger (54%) and older people (47%).
- Seventy percent of respondents were of the view that the different National Minimum Wage (NMW) rates payable to young people, 16 - 22, are unfair.
- Considerable public support was evident for a flexible retirement age: 62% agreed that "people should be allowed to retire when they want to."

### Background to the Survey

On 1 October 2006 the Equality Employment (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 came into effect. This legislation represents a further extension of equality law in Northern Ireland. The Regulations ensure that persons of all ages are protected, and that all aspects of the employment relationship are covered, including: recruitment and selection; promotion, redundancy, dismissal, training, pensions and retirement. The Regulations also introduced a national default retirement age of 65 years, and provide employees with a new right to request working beyond this default retirement age. The provision of goods, facilities and services are currently not covered under the legislation.

It was within the above context that the Commission appointed SMR to measure, among other parameters, awareness of the new Age Regulations, and attitudes

towards age-related issues. From this baseline, it is intended that the project will facilitate the tracking of change in awareness and attitudes over time. Ultimately the research outcomes will assist the Commission in identifying areas and groups where targeted interventions may be required to improve awareness, not only of rights and responsibilities under the legislation, but also of the services provided by the Commission.

### Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the survey was to acquire baseline knowledge of age-related issues in general, and key information relating to the implementation of the Age Regulations in particular.

The associated objectives were:-

- to ascertain the degree of knowledge of the Equality Employment (Age) Regulations 2006;
- to identify the level of awareness of the services which the Equality Commission can provide on age-related equality issues;
- to capture attitudes towards age-related issues; and
- to probe experiences of age-related discrimination.

## Methodology

The survey was conducted on a face-to-face basis with a representative, achieved sample of 1000 adults aged 16+. Interviews were conducted in respondent's homes using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). To ensure the sample was fully representative of the Northern Ireland adult population (16+), a stratified random sampling technique was chosen, with quotas set for age, sex, social class, religion and area of residence.

After a small pilot study in April 2007, which helped to refine the questionnaire items, fieldwork was conducted throughout Northern Ireland in May 2007. Responses were subsequently analysed and cross-tabulated by the following key variables: age, sex, religious affiliation, political opinion, disability, ethnicity, marital status, carer status (with or without dependents), and sexual orientation.

## Key Findings

### Awareness of Age Discrimination Legislation

The survey found that just under half (46%) of respondents were aware that age discrimination became unlawful in October 2006. A similar proportion (44%) exhibited awareness of the Equality Employment (Age) Regulations (NI) 2006. These figures broadly support the findings of an earlier survey (Equality Commission, 2006), which found higher levels of public awareness for mature legislation, such as the Sex Discrimination Order (NI) 1976, and lower levels of knowledge of more recent legislation, such as the Sexual Orientation Regulations 2005. In a theme which occurs throughout the Report, those with higher level

qualifications and from a higher social class, exhibited greater awareness of age discrimination.

There was a high level of awareness that job applicants and employees were covered by the Regulations (66%), but a much lower understanding that contract workers and persons using employment agencies were also protected (13% and 10% respectively). Similarly, a considerably higher proportion of respondents were aware that direct discrimination was covered (51%), compared with indirect discrimination (14%) and harassment (13%).

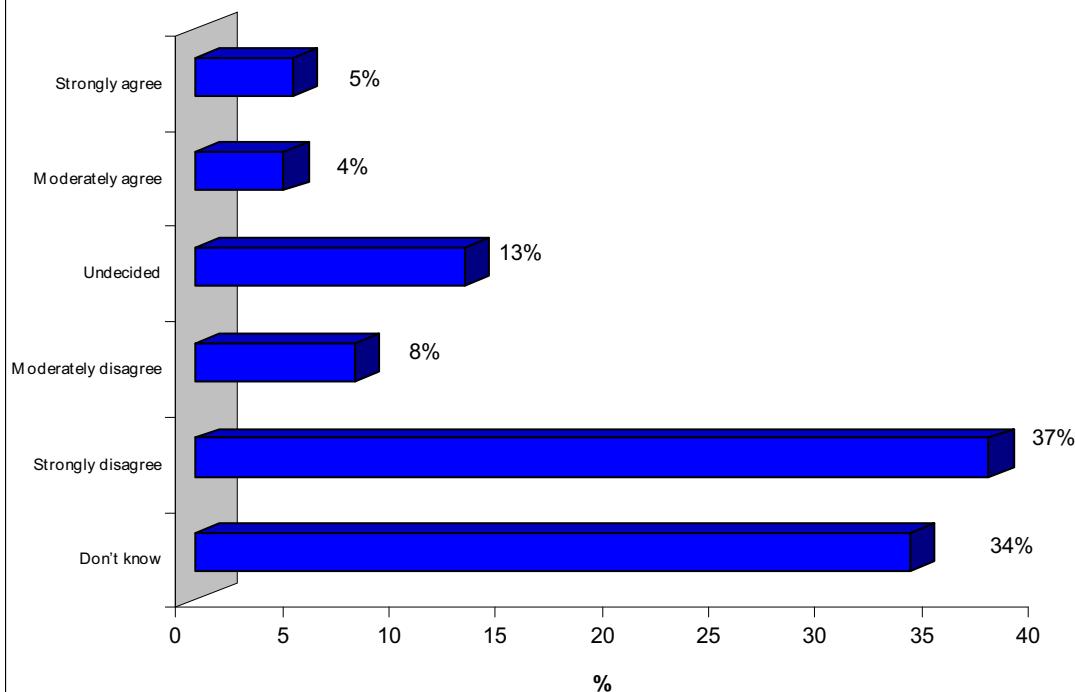
The survey found a mismatch between perceived knowledge of the Regulations and actual knowledge. Not only was this evident in awareness of the protected groups and types of discrimination outlawed (see above), but also in relation to the Default Retirement Age: almost a third (29%) of those who declared they knew what the default retirement age was (65 years) gave an incorrect answer when probed. These findings highlight the importance of further probing respondents, rather than simply reporting a "yes/no" response.

The provision of goods, facilities and services is specifically excluded from the scope of the Regulations. The survey found strong disapproval of this limitation (45% moderately or strongly disagreed), with only 9% agreeing with the exclusion (see Figure 1). In a Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (ARK, 2004), which was conducted more than two years prior to the introduction of the legislation, it was found that 71% of respondents were in favour of the provision of goods and services being covered by the Age Regulations.

### *Awareness of Services for people discriminated against on the basis of age*

One in five respondents (20%) named the Equality Commission as the organisation they should complain to if they felt they were being discriminated against because of their age. This is marginally higher than the finding obtained by the Equality Awareness Survey (Equality Commission, 2006), where 19% of respondents said that the Commission acts in an advisory capacity to people who may have experienced discrimination. It is also higher than the 11% of respondents in the previous survey who identified the Commission as the body with overall responsibility for anti-discrimination laws in Northern Ireland. However, almost half (49%) of respondents in the present survey

**Figure 1: Currently age discrimination legislation does not cover the provision of goods, facilities or services. Do you agree or disagree with this? (n=999)**



stated that they did not know the name of the appropriate body for processing their age discrimination complaint.

In addition to a complaints service, the Commission provides a range of other services relating to age discrimination. This includes information and guidance publications for the general public and employers, web-based information, research and policy initiatives, and training seminars for employers.

The survey found that, when asked unprompted, 15% indicated knowledge of Commission services that could assist them, while 85% did not know of any age-related services provided by the Commission. The evidence indicates that lack of awareness was more prevalent in the youngest and oldest age groups; persons with a Unionist political affiliation; medium or low income earners; and those from a lower social class. The report demonstrates that the financial assistance facility of the Commission in particular is not widely known.

### Attitudes towards Age-Related Issues

The survey revealed that a difficulty in obtaining employment was perceived as the main work-related issue facing both younger (54%) and older people (47%)

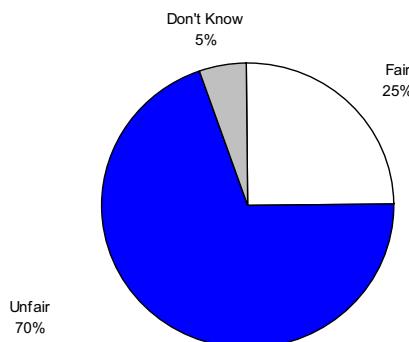
in Northern Ireland. For younger people there were two other salient issues, namely: meeting the essential criteria when applying for a job (35%) and the National Minimum Wage (25%).

The finding that both younger and older people in the current survey cited a difficulty in obtaining employment as a key issue was echoed in the NILT Survey (ARK, 2004). Although the overall percentage of the NILT sample who cited this difficulty (10%) was smaller than the current survey<sup>1</sup>, the groups most affected by difficulties in getting a job were the 18 – 24, 25 – 44 and the 50 – 59 age bands.

With regard to the issue of older people gaining employment, it may be of some interest to revisit this issue in subsequent years, by which time the Regulations will have been fully embedded in society, and older persons and employers may thus be more aware of their rights and responsibilities.

In relation to the National Minimum Wage (NMW), 70% of respondents were of the view that the different rates payable to young people between the ages of 16 – 22 are unfair (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The National Minimum Wage is different depending on the age of the employee. Do you think this is fair? (n=998)**



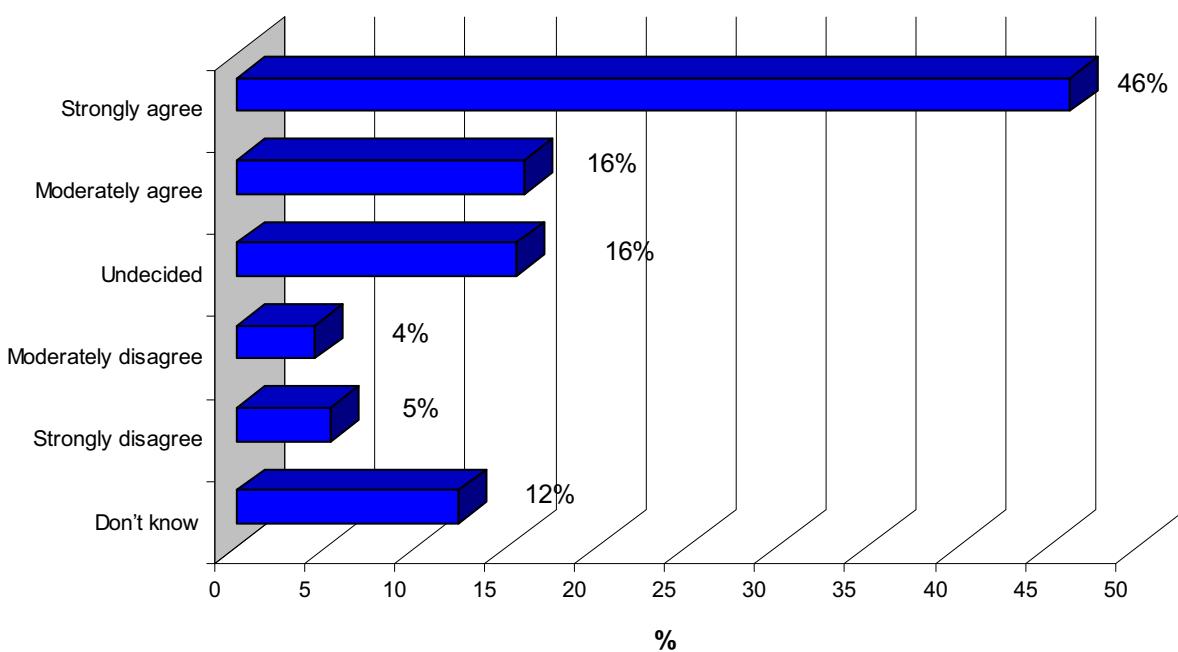
The survey sought respondents' perceptions on the treatment of younger and older people in work. An identical proportion (58%) thought that younger and older people were treated "the same", while one in ten (10%) said that younger people were treated "worse" than older people. Six percent thought that older people in work are treated "worse" than their younger colleagues. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (ARK, 2004) revealed that 9% of respondents reported that a friend or family member had been subject to "employment-related ageism", which included

promotion, redundancy/enforced retirement and recruitment.

The survey also sought to discover respondents' views on whether people aged 40 – 59 years who are looking for work are treated better or worse than younger people by prospective employers. Fifteen percent said they were treated worse. In the NILT survey, two-thirds (66%) were of the view that people in their 50s and 60s are generally treated worse by prospective employers when looking for work (ARK, 2004). The difference between the two surveys may be partially accounted for by the way in which the question was asked: while the NILT survey referred to people in their 50s and 60s, the current survey limited the age cohort to 40 – 59 year-olds.

There was considerable public support for the concept of a flexible retirement age, with nearly two-thirds of respondents (62%) moderately or strongly agreeing with the statement that "people should be allowed to retire when they want to" (see Figure 3). This support for a flexible approach to retirement was echoed in recent research commissioned by the Employers Forum on Age (2007) in GB: it was found that 92% of people surveyed believed they should have the right to work for as long as they like if they are able to do the job, regardless of their age.

**Figure 3: It has been suggested that people should be allowed to retire when they want to. Do you agree or disagree? (n = 996)**



In an attempt to uncover possible, latent age-related prejudice, respondents were asked to indicate their preferences for working with, and being line-managed by, colleagues of different ages. Approximately three-quarters of those surveyed said they had no preference concerning the age of either their colleagues (76%), or their managers (72%). It would be unwarranted to draw a robust inference from this single finding, but it does suggest that the concept of age discrimination may be a complex one: less of an issue, perhaps, for colleagues working together, while more of an issue in the employer – employee relationship.

### ***Experience of Age-Related Discrimination***

In the final section of the survey, respondents were presented with a series of questions about age discrimination in general, and their own experiences in particular.

Seventeen percent were of the view that a lot of age discrimination exists in the modern workplace. However, only 4% thought their own employer discriminated on the grounds of age and 6% felt they had personally experienced less favourable treatment from their employer due to their age (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

The above data contrasts sharply with findings from a survey conducted by the Employers Forum on Age

**Table 1: Some people have said there is a lot of age discrimination in modern workplaces. Do you agree with this or not (n = 995)**

	%	N
Yes, I agree	16.7	166
No, I disagree	24.1	240
Don't know	59.2	589

**Table 2: Do you think your employer discriminates on the grounds of age (n = 655)**

(2007) in GB: 59% of workers claimed to have witnessed ageist behaviour in the workplace during the previous twelve months.

One possible interpretation for the relatively low rates of perceived or reported age discrimination in employment is that the general public in Northern Ireland does not perceive work-related age discrimination to be a widespread phenomenon. An alternative explanation is that, as the survey was conducted just six months after the Age Regulations were implemented in October 2006, awareness of what constitutes age discrimination may still be relatively limited. Indeed, there is some support for this view in the report itself: when unprompted a relatively small proportion of those surveyed were aware that age discrimination may include indirect discrimination (14%), harassment (13%), recruitment and selection procedures (10%) opportunities for promotion (12%), and selection for redundancy (7%).

In brief, should a person not realise that it is unlawful to be treated differently from others on the basis of age, then they are unlikely to recognise any biased behaviour they may be subjected to as discriminatory.

Results from the Employers Forum survey suggest that knowledge of the Age Regulations is likely to grow over time (EFA, 2007). In October 2006, the EFA found that 51% of those surveyed in GB knew it was illegal to discriminate on the grounds of age at work: a year later this figure had risen to 86% (in the present survey only 46% knew that age discrimination was unlawful after six months).

Internal data from the Equality Commission (2007) suggests that age is in fact becoming an issue of some importance. During the first thirteen months of the Age Regulations (October 2006 – November 2007), the Commission received 277 enquiries relating to age discrimination, or 9% of the total number of enquiries during that period.

Finally, the survey concluded by asking respondents to reflect upon jobs they had been deterred from applying for in recent years. A substantial proportion (59%) of those who had been discouraged from applying for a post said it was because they considered the amount of experience required to be excessive. Younger respondents (16 – 29 years) were most likely to report having been deterred from applying for positions due to the experience criteria (74%). As case law and

	%	N
Yes	4.3	28
No	88.7	581
Don't know	7.0	46

precedents develop, it is likely that employers will increasingly have to objectively justify the length of experience required for an advertised position.

## Conclusion and Summary

The present survey was designed to establish baseline data on topics including views on age-related issues in general, awareness of the new Age Regulations, knowledge of the Equality Commission, and personal experience of discrimination.

Among other findings, the survey revealed dissatisfaction with the exclusion of goods, facilities and services from the scope of the Regulations, and the age gradient of National Minimum Wage rates. The survey also found strong support for a flexible retirement age, as opposed to the current Default Retirement Age of 65 years.

The survey also found that, six months after the introduction of the Age Regulations, just under half of those surveyed knew that age discrimination was now unlawful. Although this is encouraging when compared with knowledge of other anti-discrimination statutes such as sexual orientation (33%) [Equality Commission 2006], further progress is still required.

In relation to age, knowledge of the services the Equality Commission can provide is relatively low and varies considerably across demographic groups. However, given that fieldwork for the survey was conducted only six months after the Regulations were introduced; this lack of awareness is perhaps unsurprising.

Finally, the relatively small incidence of personal experiences of age discrimination reported in the survey should be set against the growing number of age-related enquiries and complaints being received by the Commission.

## References

ARK (2004). Ageing Well? Research Update, No. 31, June 2004, Evasion, E. Belfast: ARK (Northern Ireland) Social and Political Archive, <http://www.ark.ac.uk>.

Employers Forum on Age (2007). Increased awareness of age laws spells trouble for employers, Press Release, 28 September 2007 Available at: <http://www.efa.org.uk/press/notes026.asp>.

Equality Commission (2006). Awareness of Equality Issues amongst the General Public. Belfast: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Equality Commission (2007). Age statistics: number of enquiries between 1 October 2006 and 15 November 2007. Internal communication.

## Footnotes

- 1 The differing proportions in the current and NILT surveys who cited getting employment as a key issue can perhaps be explained by referring to the relevant item in the surveys. In the current survey, respondents were probed on **work-related** issues only, while the NILT survey asked respondents to identify the main **problems** facing older people in Northern Ireland today. The responses included fear of crime, loneliness, access to healthcare, employment, transport etc.

Copies of the full report can be obtained from the Equality Commission (see address below) or from our web site: [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)



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