

C O P N I

Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

A stack of seven British coins, including a £1 coin, sits on top of a £50 banknote. The background is filled with other banknotes, including a £20 note and a £10 note, creating a sense of money and finance.

Financial Abuse of Older People in Northern Ireland:

The Unsettling Truth

September 2016

This publication is available in other languages and formats on request.

Also available for download at www.copni.org.



Financial Abuse of Older People in Northern Ireland: The Unsettling Truth
Published by The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland
September 2016

© The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland copyright (2016)
You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence> or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Contents



Commissioner's Foreword	Page 4
Executive Summary	Page 5
Context	Page 8
Methodology	Page 12
Detailed Findings	Page 14
Conclusions	Page 19
Acknowledgements	Page 22

Commissioner's Foreword

I am both shocked and saddened to report that financial abuse against older people in Northern Ireland is on the increase. From requests for help from older people, their families and their carers, I have seen both the frequency and the devastating impact of financial abuse. As Commissioner for Older People, I am committed to taking action to tackle this appalling crime.

My office has undertaken an extensive Northern Ireland wide survey to understand exactly how widespread the issue of financial abuse is. This study is the first time that the prevalence of financial abuse of older people in Northern Ireland has been examined and the findings are stark. Financial abuse results in poverty and can severely impact the physical and mental health of older people. Shockingly, the perpetrator is all too often someone the older person knows or trusts.

As it stands, financial abuse is currently affecting a large number of older people across Northern Ireland, but many are reluctant to report the abuse. Reasons for remaining silent about this crime range from an unwillingness to talk about personal finances with others to the sensitivity of family relationships. Often there will be no visible signs that abuse is happening. This makes it harder for those who can help to even recognise the problem and to offer the older person support to deal with it.

Scammers and fraudsters are becoming more sophisticated in how they commit their crimes too. Advances in technology mean there are even more ways to cleverly exploit and prey on older people. Any unknown or unfamiliar attempt to access finances causes annoyance, harm and distress to an older person who is targeted.

Until now, there has been no full understanding of the prevalence of financial abuse of older people. This prevalence study clearly defines the scale and scope of the problem for the first time in Northern Ireland.

As it stands, thousands of older people are currently experiencing financial abuse in its various forms. This must be stopped and I am committed to examining this issue further throughout my term. Now is the time to act. Tackling this crime must be placed firmly on the Government's agenda.



Eddie Lynch
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Executive Summary

The definition of financial abuse, published by the Department of Health (formerly the DHSSPS) in 2015, as part of the Adult Safeguarding Policy, is similar to that of many other countries. It describes financial abuse as:

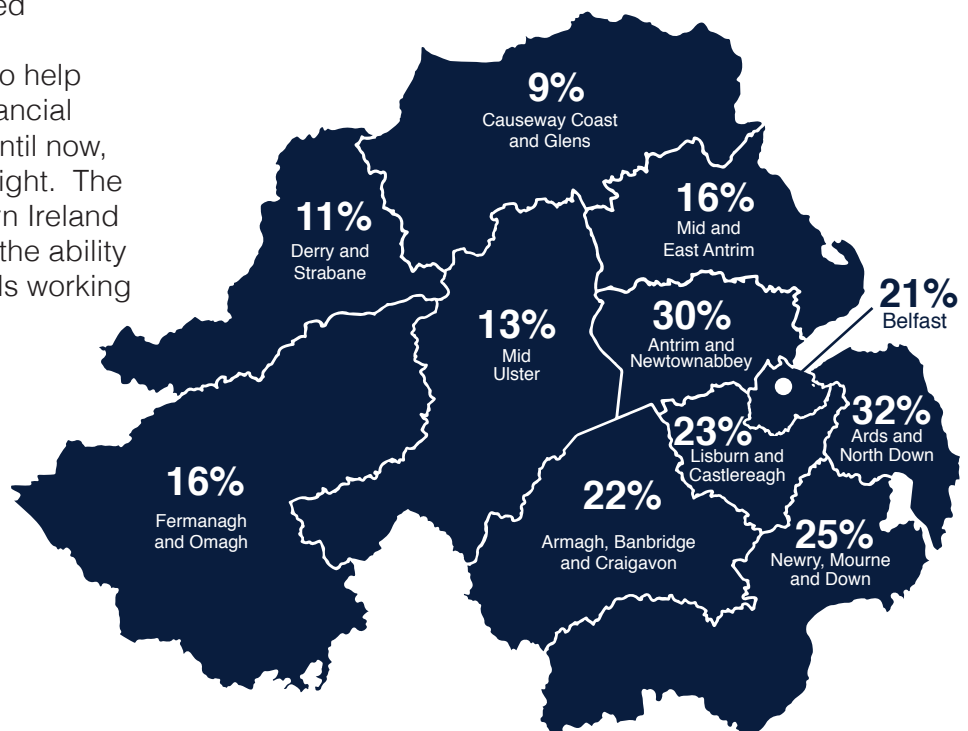
“ Actual or attempted theft, fraud or burglary. It is the misappropriation or misuse of money, property, benefits, material goods or other asset transactions which the person did not or could not consent to, or which were invalidated by intimidation, coercion or deception. This may include exploitation, embezzlement, withholding pension or benefits or pressure exerted around wills, property or inheritance.”¹

Many nations, including the United States, Canada and Spain, have conducted ‘prevalence studies’ to help them understand the scale of financial abuse within their populations. Until now, Northern Ireland lacked such insight. The lack of detailed data at a Northern Ireland level has undoubtedly restricted the ability of policymakers and professionals working

in this area to help vulnerable older people affected by financial abuse.

This study demonstrates that 21% of people aged 60 and over are affected by some level of financial abuse. Whilst all of the international studies on financial abuse are not directly comparable, the information on prevalence revealed by studies in Great Britain and Ireland stated that the rates of financial abuse of older people were 0.7% and 1.3% respectively. In Canada, the figure is 2.5% and it is 5.25% in the United States.

The figure below highlights the levels of financial abuse by council area in line with what respondents said they had experienced.



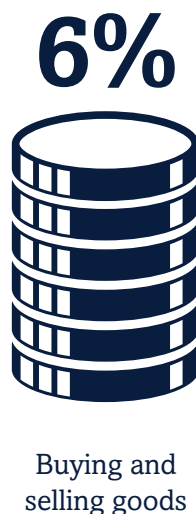
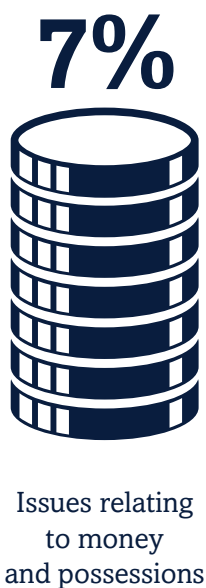
¹DHSSPS/DOJ- Adult Safeguarding Prevention and Protection Partnership (2015)

Demographic, technological and cultural trends all demonstrate that repeated referrals of financial abuse continue to increase. This study outlines the different types of financial abuse taking place in Northern Ireland and where it is happening.

Over one in five people aged over 60 are affected by financial abuse and this cannot be tolerated. We must act now to take more action to prevent financial abuse against older people.

21%
of people aged 60 and over are affected by financial abuse

Most Prevalent Forms of Financial Abuse



CONTEXT



Context

Financial abuse is a key element of the broader issue of elder abuse. The World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of elder abuse is a *"single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person. It can be of various forms: physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, financial or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect"*²

Within this definition, WHO states that elder financial abuse is the...

“ Illegal or improper exploitation or use of funds or other resources of the older person.”³

Academic researchers also continue to refer to

“ mounting concern internationally among social workers, health service providers, advocacy groups, legislators and others that elder financial abuse is a growing problem.”⁴

Financial abuse is a very serious problem for older people in Northern Ireland, affecting their physical and mental health. Higher levels of social isolation also mean that older people are more vulnerable to this crime than other age groups.⁵ Being a target of financial abuse affects emotional wellbeing, bringing with it feelings of betrayal, embarrassment, loss of self-esteem and fear. It can also affect

confidence, meaning a higher risk of social isolation and impact on an older person's ability to live independently.

Data collection on this issue by public authorities in Northern Ireland is relatively incomplete when compared with other countries. In 2014, only 1,200 adults were referred to Adult Safeguarding services across Northern Ireland due to a 'presenting concern' that they had been subjected to some form of financial abuse.

This data is based on the initial 'presenting concern' and does not include cases of financial abuse which formed part of other referrals made. These numbers would also not include those cases where financial abuse had taken place but was not referenced in the initial report. Additionally, it is widely recognised that financial abuse is under reported, especially when perpetrated by a 'trusted person' or other member of the family.

Whilst some efforts have been made in recent years to highlight the issue of financial abuse of older people, much more needs to be done. The inclusion of a specific reference to financial abuse within the Department of Health's Adult Safeguarding Policy (2015) is a welcome first step but it is not enough. The development of an Adult Safeguarding Bill is urgently needed in order to better protect older people from this crime and to serve as the basis for collective action to tackle the issue.

² World Health Organisation, 'Ageing and Life-Course: Elder Abuse', http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/

³ Dr Susan Davidson et al., 'Financial Abuse Evidence Review', Age UK, (2015).

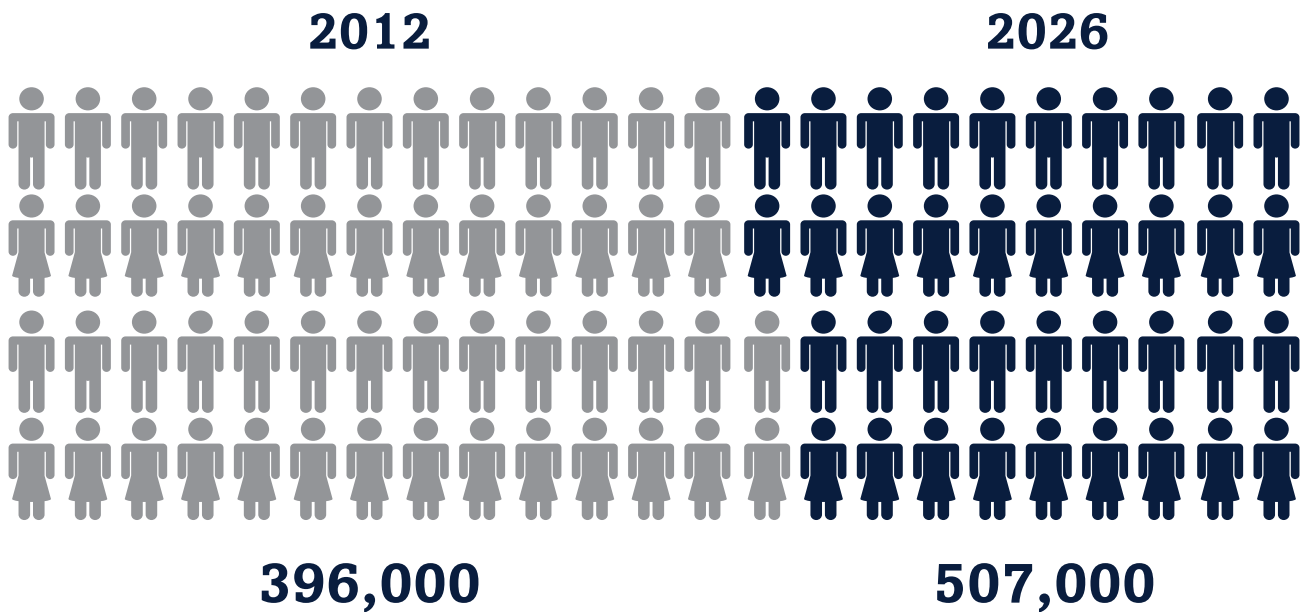
⁴ Amanda Phelan et al., 'Financial Abuse of Older People: A Review'.

⁵ Dr Susan Davidson et al., 'Financial Abuse Evidence Review'.

Although financial abuse is a complex and sensitive issue which will need long term focus, it must also be recognised that this is happening to older people now. In addition, new opportunities for financial abuse of older people are emerging on a day to day basis.⁶ Financial abuse, if left unchecked, will affect even more older people in Northern Ireland in years to come for a number of reasons:

Numbers of Older People

According to population projections, the number of older people in Northern Ireland will increase from 396,000 to 507,000 by 2026. Further increases will follow, leading to 642,000 people aged 60 and over by 2046. Northern Ireland must protect a growing number of older people, some of whom will hold increased amounts of wealth.



⁶ Centre for Policy on Ageing, 'The Financial Abuse of Older People', (2008).

A Greater Reliance on Informal Care

There is an increased level of informal care and support being provided at home by carers, families and neighbours. Whilst the majority of this care is provided with the older person's best interests at heart, this does present more opportunity to those in society who are less scrupulous or who feel they are 'entitled' to something in return for their services.

Use of Technology For Financial Transactions

As increasing numbers of day to day financial transactions take place online, this offers more opportunities for hackers and scammers to steal personal details. Future decades will also see greater numbers of older people using a broad range of online services, further increasing possibilities for financial abuse. The international nature of online criminal activity creates more difficulties for legal enforcement in terms of shutting down criminal networks.

Cultural Factors

Previous research has reported that older people are more reluctant than younger victims to discuss financial matters and are more unlikely to report instances of financial abuse.⁷ Many older people also find reporting instances of financial abuse especially difficult when the perpetrator is a family member or other 'trusted person'.⁸ Non-reporting makes it harder for those organisations that can help to monitor and detect financial abuse, especially when the abuse may have started out as legitimate transactions which have then escalated over time.⁹

Feedback from professionals, families and others working on the issue of financial abuse in Northern Ireland has highlighted a level of confusion in terms of the scale of financial abuse.

In November 2015, COPNI organised a roundtable discussion which included a wide range of organisations, professionals, academics and others working on the issue. The range and 'types' of financial abuse under discussion made it clear that a collective approach to tackling the issue would be needed. Participants also discussed the need for awareness raising as well as better support and intelligence around the issues. In particular, those in attendance discussed the difficulties posed when financial abuse is perpetrated by family members and relations or by other 'trusted persons'.

⁷ Dr Susan Davidson et al., 'Financial Abuse Evidence Review'.

⁸ Dr Susan Davidson et al., 'Financial Abuse Evidence Review'.

⁹ Dr Susan Davidson et al., 'Financial Abuse Evidence Review'.

METHODOLOGY



Methodology

The fieldwork for this study was conducted by Perceptive Insight, and was both methodologically robust and statistically significant.

During fieldwork, 1,025 older people (60 and over) were interviewed. The survey was designed to produce a statistically representative sample of older people across Northern Ireland by age, gender, deprivation quintile and region (in each of the eleven Council areas).

Whilst other international studies were not identical, some degree of comparison can be made between the Northern Ireland results and international studies in terms of the prevalence of financial abuse.

Other studies of prevalence have taken place in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, New York, Canada, Israel, Spain, Australia and the United States. The Northern Ireland survey demonstrates that there is a significant and high prevalence of financial abuse of older people here.

Country	Ages Surveyed	Number of People Surveyed	Prevalence of Financial Abuse of Older People
Northern Ireland	60 and over	1,025	21%
Great Britain	66 and over	2,111	0.7%
Ireland	65 and over	2,021	1.3%
US (New York)	60-101 (median age of 74)	4,156	4.2%
United States (National)	60 or older	6,589	5.2%
Canada	65 and over	2,008	2.5%
Israel	Men 65+ Women 59+	1,045	6.6%
Spain	65 and over	2,401	0.2%
South Australia	65 and over	1,158	2.7%

N.B. The age range for this study is similar, although not identical, to other international studies. The study is not directly comparable given differences in definition and prevalence calculation methodologies, but methodological similarities mean that broad comparisons can be made.

DETAILED FINDINGS



Detailed Findings

The table below demonstrates the prevalence of the different 'types' of financial abuse experienced by older people in Northern Ireland. From the results for each section, trends can be detected and emerging areas of financial abuse of older people can be identified.

Type of Financial Abuse	Percentage of Those Surveyed Who Experienced the Abuse	Number of Older People in Northern Ireland Experiencing the Abuse (when survey results are extrapolated against total NI population of older people)
Issues relating to money and possessions	7%	25,061
Buying and selling goods	6%	21,480
Issues relating to charity contributions	4%	14,320
Coercion to sign and fraudulent use of signatures	3%	10,740
Changes to legal and financial documents and investments	3%	10,740
Experience of coercion	3%	10,740
Bank account activity	2%	7,160
Deception and misuse of money	2%	7,160
Issues relating to inheritance and power of attorney	2%	7,160

Money and Possessions

This was the most prevalent type of financial abuse of older people, with 7% of respondents saying they had experienced this form of abuse. This is equivalent to 25,061 older people in Northern Ireland:

- 2% confirmed there had been **unexplained incidents when their money or possessions had disappeared** and 1% suspected this to be the case.
- 1% reported that they had **unpaid bills, eviction notices or utilities shut off even though they had enough money to cover it**, and a further 1% suspected that this had happened.
- 3% of respondents confirmed that they are **frequently asked for money** and a further 1% suspected this to be true.
- 3% stated that **someone keeps asking about their money even though it makes them feel uncomfortable**. An additional 1% suspected this to be the case.

Buying/Selling Goods

This was the second most prevalent form of financial abuse, with 6% of respondents confirming that they had experienced this form of abuse. When extrapolated against the total population of older people in Northern Ireland, it is projected that 21,480 older people are experiencing this type of abuse:

- A total of 4% disclosed that they **felt tricked or pressured into buying something that they later regretted**, with 1% suspecting this had happened.
- 3% reported that they **felt cheated after someone had sold them something**, with one per cent suspecting this had happened.
- Meanwhile, 1% suspected that they had **been tricked or pressured into selling a valuable possession for less than it is worth**.
- 1% confirmed that a **caregiver overcharged them for their services**.

Issues Relating to Charitable Contributions

4% of respondents confirmed they had encountered problems in relation to their contributions to charity, which is the equivalent of 14,320 older people in Northern Ireland.

- 2% said that they were **victim of a scam involving giving money to a bogus charity** and 2% believed they may have been a victim of this kind of scam; and
- 3% disclosed that they were **persuaded to contribute beyond their means to churches or charities** and a further 1% suspect that this had occurred.

Coercion to Sign and Fraudulent Use of Signatures

Respondents were asked a number of questions relating to the use of their signature and signing documents. Overall, a total of 3% of respondents confirmed that they had experienced coercion to sign documents and/or fraudulent use of their signature, the equivalent of 10,740 older people in Northern Ireland.

- 2% reported that they have **signed documents without understanding what they were signing** and a further 2% suspected that they had done this.
- 1% confirmed that their **signature has been used fraudulently** and 1% suspected this to be the case.
- 1% suspected that they had been **pressured into co-signing a loan**.

Changes to Legal and Financial Documents and Investments

3% confirmed that they had encountered problems in relation to changes to their legal and financial documents and investments, the equivalent of 10,740 older people in Northern Ireland.

- 1% reported that they have been **talked into making investments that were not in their best interest**, a further 1% suspected this to be the case.
- 1% revealed they had been **forced into making financial decisions that they would not normally make** and an additional 1% suspected that this had happened to them.

Experience of Coercion

3% of respondents had experienced this form of financial abuse, which is the equivalent of about 10,740 older people in Northern Ireland:

- 1% revealed that they had been **offered companionship in exchange for money by a family member or a friend**.
- 1% stated that **family friends had used pressure, intimidation or punishment to try and get their money**, and 1% suspected this to be true.
- 1% declared that **family or friends have demanded money off them**, while an additional 1% suspected this to be the case.

Bank Account Activity

2% of respondents confirmed they had encountered problems in relation to their bank account activity – the equivalent of 7,160 older people in Northern Ireland.

- 1% reported their **ATM or credit card was used without their permission** and a further 2% suspected this to have occurred.
- 2% stated that **there was unusual activity in their bank account** and a further 1% suspected this.

Deception and Misuse of Money

2% of respondents confirmed that they had encountered problems in relation to deception and misuse of money. This equates to 7,160 older people in Northern Ireland.

- 1% disclosed that **a family member or friend had lived with them but refused to pay their share of expenses** and a further 1% suspected this to be the case.
- 1% believed **family or friends had taken money to do something but never did it** and a further 1% suspected this had happened.
- 1% indicated that **a family member or close friend has handled their money irresponsibly** and a further 1% suspected this.

Issues Relating to Inheritance and Power of Attorney

2% of respondents confirmed that they had encountered problems in relation to inheritance and power of attorney. Again this equates to 7,160 older people in Northern Ireland:

- 1% suspected that **family or friends misused their power of attorney or guardianship.**
- 1% reportedly believed that **family or friends feel entitled to use their money for themselves**, and 1% suspected this to be the case.
- 1% stated that **family or friends tried to prevent them from spending money in order to maximise their inheritance**, and a further 1% suspected this to be true.

CONCLUSIONS



Conclusions

More than 75,000 older people in Northern Ireland are experiencing some type of financial abuse. The impact on victims is devastating, threatening the psychological and financial well being of older people. Financial abuse also has a detrimental impact on relations with family and carers.

The overall prevalence of financial abuse of older people in Northern Ireland is an alarming 21%. This figure is likely to not tell the full story as a level of under-reporting must be assumed.

The definition of financial abuse as articulated in Northern Ireland's Adult Safeguarding Policy reflects the complexity of the issue. It is clear from this study that there are many different types of financial abuse affecting older people in Northern Ireland. These range from issues relating to charitable contributions and buying goods to issues relating to inheritance and coercion.

This prevalence study provides evidence of the scope and scale of the issue of financial abuse of older people in Northern Ireland. Organisations must now target their responses to this crime. Responsibility for protecting older people from financial abuse lies across the public, private, independent, voluntary and community sectors, as well as with families and with Northern Ireland society as a whole.



Increasing public awareness and educating older people about financial abuse could lead to an increase in the detection of abuse and give older people more confidence to report it. It is also important that staff working with older people are trained to recognise when financial abuse is taking place, and that they are informed about the need to ensure good practice when selling goods and services so that older people are informed about what they are purchasing.

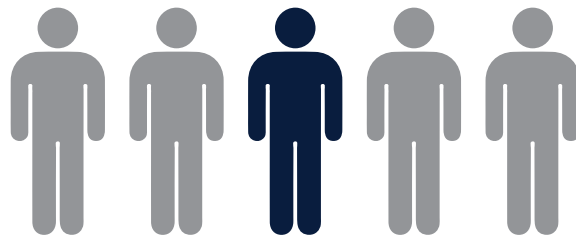
The introduction of an Adult Safeguarding Bill for Northern Ireland, incorporating a clear definition of financial abuse, would also help those working in this area to prosecute offenders, deterring potential abusers and offering greater redress for older victims.

This report needs to change how organisations work together, as well as raising awareness. The data within this report should enable those dealing with the prevention or effects of financial abuse to better identify older people who are at risk, or who may be 'silently' experiencing financial abuse.

It should help organisations to recognise behaviours and transactions which are indicators that financial abuse is happening.

This report must underpin action to tackle financial abuse across Northern Ireland and should help guide organisational collaboration. It should enable organisations to work together to combat financial abuse, combining their collective resources to do so.

Northern Ireland policy makers, organisations and individuals working with older people now have a clear indication of the prevalence of financial abuse. 1 in 5 older people are affected. It is time for Government and society as a whole to act and put a stop to this type of abuse that whilst often hidden, has a significant impact on the lives of older people.



1 in 5 older people currently experience financial abuse

Acknowledgements

All older people who participated in the research
Action on Elder Abuse Northern Ireland
Advice NI
Age NI
Age Sector Platform
AIB
All Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern
Ireland
Business Services Organisation
CAB Northern Ireland
Danske Bank
Department of Justice
Dr Amanda Phelan, UCD Dublin
Health and Social Care Board
Independent Health & Care Providers
Information Commissioner's Office
Master Hilary Wells, Office of Care & Protection
Money Advice Service
Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service
Perceptive Insight team and field staff
PSNI
The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
The Consumer Council
Ulster Bank
Utility Regulator
Victim Support NI



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast BT2 7DP
T: 028 90 890 892
E: info@copni.org
www.copni.org