What is Interculturalism?

And why is it important in the residential care sector?
Ireland has become an increasingly diverse society over the last couple of decades. Today it is home to people from approximately 200 nations. The change has been enormously enriching for the country, not least for the older adult care sector. It is now estimated that up to a third of staff working in the older adult care sector are from another country.
Residential care homes are also starting to receive residents from a number of countries, a trend that is certain to increase in the coming years.

The arrival of staff from all over the world, with a wide range of professional and life experiences, brings new skills into the workforce and of course helps our society. This is particularly true for the residential care sector as it prepares for the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society.
Cultural Iceberg

Very often cultures which are different to our own can seem unfamiliar. Unfamiliarity can sometimes be uncomfortable.

For people moving to live in Ireland there is the unfamiliarity of the new culture, possibly a new language, a new climate, long distances from family and friends.

For people who have lived in Ireland all their lives there is the unfamiliarity of neighbours, work colleagues, and carers from different cultures, whose first language might not be English. We are all now interacting with people who look and dress differently and behave in ways that may even be considered ‘odd’ compared to our own cultural norms.

Misunderstanding can occur because what makes sense in one culture can seem strange, even rude, in another. An intercultural approach helps everyone to be more comfortable with these differences.

Culture can be compared to an iceberg: it has some visible parts above the water but most of it is ‘invisible’ or below the surface. More obvious elements of culture, such as food and clothes, are often just the ‘tip of the iceberg’. Those elements which are not as obvious such as why someone eats or dresses a certain way, are represented by the larger part of the iceberg under the surface.

The idea of culture as an iceberg helps us to think about how we can understand our own and others’ cultures. It can also help us to appreciate and actively promote interculturalism.

The more ‘visible’ aspects of culture are easier to identify and to celebrate. However for deeper intercultural understanding, we all need to reflect on the ‘invisible’ aspects of culture.
Cultural Norms

We can’t assume that everyone from a particular culture thinks, feels or behaves the same. In every culture, there are many different kinds of people. However, there are common norms of behaviour that vary between cultures.
Sense of humour
Some Irish people love to ‘slag’ (to jokingly tease) each other and it can often be a way to build relationships on work teams. Sarcasm is usually part of this. However for a non-Irish person, and even for an Irish person who is not used to it, it can be very difficult to understand how this works. And it can sometimes feel excluding, too personal or overly critical.

Formality
Cultures vary greatly in the level of formality used when people address each other. In most Irish workplaces in recent years the typical norm is to address people by their first names. This can seem strange to people from many other cultures which more typically use formal styles like Mrs, Mr, Sir or Maam etc.

Communication style
Cultures vary too in their use of direct and indirect communication. Irish people tend to be more indirect and to use ‘small talk’ to engage with others. For instance, they often remark about the weather when initiating a conversation or developing rapport. For people from many other cultures where the norm is to get ‘straight to the point’ this seems unnecessary and even irritating. However, awareness of these differences can be especially important in building relationships with residents from Irish backgrounds who enjoy small talk and building trust through chatting.

HELPFUL TIPS
As a way of breaking down the barriers that cultural differences can sometimes lead to, why not occasionally allocate five or ten minutes at the end of a staff meeting for the exploration and discussion of intercultural issues or cultural practices that are interesting or unfamiliar?
So what is Interculturalism?

Promoting interaction, understanding, respect between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds

Making sure that cultural diversity is acknowledged and catered for

Including people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the design and planning of services

Acknowledging that people from all cultures should have the freedom to keep their cultural heritage alive and share it with others

Seeing differences between people as something positive that can enrich society

Recognising racism as an issue that needs to be tackled in order to create a more inclusive society
Why is interculturalism important?

An intercultural approach is about making the unfamiliar more familiar and understanding what it’s like to walk in somebody else’s shoes.

Cultivating an intercultural environment offers benefits to everyone within the residential care home community and in our every day lives.

An intercultural residential home, or indeed an intercultural city, town, village, is a vibrant place of diverse identities and interactions where everyone is encouraged to grow and express themselves.

We have a great opportunity in Ireland to avoid the mistakes made in other countries where discrimination and racism have had a negative impact on society.
Age Action talked to residents, their families, staff & managers. They all described working and living in a culturally diverse care home:

Managers told us that …

‘Diversity on our work teams improves teamwork and humour’ and ‘it increases expertise and work efficiency’

Residents said …

‘It’s good to learn about other cultures’ and ‘it would be boring if everyone was the same’

Staff members said that …

‘having staff from so many countries is a way of travelling the world without actually travelling’ and ‘people from other countries diffuse conflict in a unique way’
What you can do to make your Residential Care Home more intercultural!

Organise activities and events that celebrate diversity and the cultural backgrounds of the various people who work and live in the home.

Set up a Diversity Committee composed of residents, staff and residents’ families that would help maintain interculturalism and diversity in an ongoing and sustainable way.

Regular training and awareness sessions, such as the Age Action training offered with the Intercultural Care Home Project, could be provided for residents and staff.

The promotional material of the home could represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people who live and work there.

Information on workplace policies and employee rights could be made easily available so that the steps to take, if a resident or staff member experienced discrimination, would be clear and accessible.

Allow for flexible holidays or unpaid leave for longer visits home for holidays or significant family occasions for people who come from other countries.

Having regular, cross-cultural, conversation sessions with staff, residents and their families could make the sharing and exchange of understanding of people’s respective memories and cultures easier.

Provide induction training for staff that helps them become familiar with the various languages, cultures and customs of their new country.

Maps, flags & art could be displayed around the home which reflect the diversity of everyone in the home.

*Training can be provided in the future by Age Action or similar agencies
Intercultural Ethos & Environment

RESIDENTS
- Easier to share each other’s history and culture, chat and humour
- Increased trust, learning & stimulation
  - Better relationships with all staff
  - Improved quality of life & care

FAMILY & FRIENDS
- Better relationships with staff and management
- Empowerment (feeling comfortable to raise issues - including those to do with ethnic or cultural difference)

Some practical everyday benefits of building a culture of e
Some practical everyday benefits of building a culture of equality and interculturalism in your residential care home

**STAFF**
- Easier to raise issues surrounding intercultural misunderstanding and to offer support where instances of prejudice or racism occur
- Better relationships with management, colleagues, residents, & their families
- Improved working conditions
- Empowerment
- Deeper understanding of residents’ needs

**MANAGEMENT**
- Attract, retain and provide a good working environment for all staff
- Increases the ability to deliver first rate care
- Ensures home is in line with current equality legislation & best practice
- Increases capacity to promote intercultural understanding and prevent racism and discrimination
Some Residential Care Homes already...

- Have diversity training for the whole staff – they consider it ‘spring cleaning’ and a healthy way of ‘opening up conversations’ about differences that can sometimes be hard to openly discuss.
- Have set up a diversity committee, which includes staff, managers and residents.
- Hold an intercultural conversation exchange between residents and staff from as many different countries as possible, including Ireland, who meet up once a week to discuss history, songs and stories.
- Enjoy regular exhibitions of art from different countries representing the countries staff come from, including Ireland!
- Have regular intercultural staff lunches exploring the food of different cultures.
Diversity Works!

Diversity is advantageous and enriching for everyone. Especially for relationships between staff members, management, and residents & their families.

The residential care home ‘ecosystem’ is now made up of people from many different cultural backgrounds. To continue to benefit from this diversity we can all help to nurture and celebrate this positive change.

Age Action is playing its part by working with several residential care homes in the Intercultural Care Home Project, to support them in creating an intercultural environment that respects everyone equally. This booklet is part of the project.

But unfortunately some people don’t understand the benefits of diversity. Racism, xenophobia and prejudice still exist.
Racism & Discrimination

For many people from cultural and ethnic minorities the experience of living in Ireland is a positive one. For others, however, the experience is not always so positive and can be marred by the reality of prejudice.

What is racism?

Racism is a specific form of discrimination and exclusion faced by cultural and ethnic minorities.

Although there is no biological or scientific basis for dividing human groups by ‘race’, racism is real. It includes a number of things such as prejudice and discrimination, directed against someone of a different ‘race’ based on the belief that one’s own ‘race’ is superior.

In Ireland it is experienced by a wide range of groups including Travellers, migrants, refugees, Jewish and Muslim people.

Racism can include:

- Discrimination in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services.
- Verbal abuse, threatening behaviour, assault.
- Institutional forms of racism – the failure of organisations or public services to accommodate diversity and failure to treat everyone equally and with the respect that every person deserves.

Say ‘No’ to Discrimination
If you experience or witness **Racism** or **Discrimination**, how can you address it?

**Residents and their families:**

You could start by discussing it with a staff member you trust. If you don’t find this satisfactory, a second way could be to make a formal complaint to a Manager or Director of Nursing. Or you could contact one of the organisations listed on the next page, the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI); the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI); The European Network Against Racism Ireland (ENAR).

**Staff:**

One option would be for you to discuss it with your supervisor or a manager. A second is to contact your Trade Union or one of the organisations listed on the next page: MRCI; ICI; ENAR Ireland.

If you witness a colleague experiencing prejudice or racism you can offer them support.

**Managers**

An important way to address these issues is to ensure that there is an adequate policy in place and that everyone is aware of it. Also to make sure that there are supports in place for anyone who experiences or witnesses racism and discrimination.

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act (2005), employers are responsible, as far as reasonably practicable, for the safety, health and welfare of their employees, including their mental health. Racist behaviour has a very damaging psychological affect on those directly affected and on witnesses.
Where to go for more advice and support

If the usual supports are not receptive to your complaint there are other routes to address the issue. Racism is dealt with under two main pieces of legislation:

- **The Employment Equality Acts (2004)** deal with discrimination within employment on nine grounds including ‘race’ or ethnicity and membership of the Traveller community. The Equal Status Acts deal with discrimination in service delivery on the same grounds. To get further advice you can contact the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

- **Criminal Legislation**: A racist incident is a crime. Any incident which is perceived to be racially motivated by the victim or a witness can be reported to a member of *An Garda Síochána*. Garda Ethnic Liaison Officers in your local Garda station are specially trained to help you. Contact the Garda Racial, Intercultural and Diversity Office for more information.

- It is also useful and important to report all such incidents to the **Immigrant Council of Ireland** who have a Racist Incidents Support and Referral Service which provides a range of supports to people who have experienced or witnessed racism.

- **ENAR Ireland** (the European Network Against Racism Ireland) also run a confidential Racist Incident Reporting System and can offer guidance and advice.
More supports
This is not an exhaustive list but these organisations can provide more help and resources

ENAR Ireland
www.enarireland.org

Age Action Ireland
www.ageaction.ie

The Migrants Rights Centre Ireland
National Organisation offering support to Migrant workers and their Families
www.mrci.ie

Immigrant Council of Ireland
Information, Legal advice, Advocacy for Migrants
www.immigrantcouncil.ie

Irish Refugee Council
www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie

SIPTU
Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union
Trade Union to which a lot of Care staff belong and which provides support and advocacy on employment issues
www.siptu.ie

Metro Eireann
Multicultural Newspaper
www.metroeireann.com

AkiDwA
Support and Information Service for Migrant Women in Ireland
www.akidwa.ie

Crosscare
Information, advocacy and referral service for migrants
www.crosscare.ie
Age Action Intercultural Care Home Project

For more information contact Age Action

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