



Statement to the Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Mental Health on the services provided to older people and the demands made on them by the impact of COVID-19

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On behalf of Age Action I would like to thank members of the Committee for the invitation to present to you today.

Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation for older people and ageing. Our advocacy and policy work for equality and rights is grounded in the lived experience of people growing older in Ireland and informed our COVID-19 plan (*Connect, Inform, Support*).

To combat digital exclusion during the pandemic, we launched the Age Action Getting Started KIT in May 2020 and posted over 7,000 free digital skills guides to older people. In addition, 769 people were supported to improve their digital skills through the help of volunteer tutors. RTÉ personality Mary Kennedy recorded six tutorials giving real time demonstrations to accompany the guides, some of which were broadcast by RTÉ.

From the start of the pandemic, we became acutely aware of the negative impacts of digital exclusion on people's ability to access public services and information, and to manage their own affairs. Age Action is advocating for targeted digital literacy supports for older people and a digital allowance as part of social protection measures to support people to overcome financial barriers associated with material access to digital devices.

Budget 2021 saw no increase in the core State Pension rates: it did not allow for any increase in the cost of living or support to people to withstand the economic shock of lockdown. Income for those who are living with other people has stood still since 2019.

Age Action initiated a **Hardship Fund**, in association with the Irish Red Cross, to address small, COVID-19 related financial hardships experienced by older people. Age Action raised a total of €110,000 but with 28,000 eligible applications it was massively oversubscribed. A total of 453 applicants were supported with small grants of up to €500 each. Applications showed the difficulties older people were facing including but not limited to increased heating and fuel costs, increased costs relating to digital devices and the costs of replacing small appliances urgently. Lockdown also raised the cost of living, as many people had to rely on deliveries and did not have the ability to shop around to reduce costs. Age Action believes that the Government should commission a study on the Cost of Ageing, similar to the study on the Cost of Disability so that social protection measures can be better informed by this evidence.

Many older people have experienced bereavement during the pandemic but have not been able to have a traditional wake or funeral. This will affect some people's mental health and will take time to heal (as we have memorial services where families can gather, etc.). The Department of Social Protection could be asked to be flexible around the means-testing of Exceptional Needs Payments to cover the cost of memorial services where funeral costs were not sought by a person.

People who live in nursing homes carried the burden of COVID-19 both in terms of the impact of the disease itself and response measures which saw their right to life, to family life and participation in society undermined. The recommendations of the Expert Panel on Nursing Homes and the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Response Measures related to

residential care need to be urgently implemented. People have a right to choice and control over their lives, including where and how they are cared for. The proposed Commission on Care should be urgently established to address the long-known inadequacies in our long term care infrastructure.

Throughout the pandemic, public discourse about older people portrayed COVID-19 as a disease of older people, leading to social stigma, discrimination and exacerbating negative stereotypes about older persons which can have a detrimental impact on people's mental health.¹ As noted by the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, while older people have become highly visible in the COVID-19 outbreak, their voices, opinions and concerns have not been heard.² Age Action continues to call for the appointment of a Commissioner for Older Persons to provide independent voice for older people and accountability from Government.

At the same time as identifying supports that were needed, Age Action heard from many older people who felt that the representation of all older people as "vulnerable" during the pandemic contributed to ageism and stigmatisation by putting a focus on vulnerability over autonomy.³

To highlight the fact that ageism must be addressed in all policies, settings and practices Age Action intends to make ageism the focus of Positive Ageing Week which will coincide with UN International Day of Older Persons on Friday 1 October and we look forward to engaging with Government representatives, relevant Departments and broader stakeholders as we begin to apply the lessons of COVID-19.

Thank you for your time today.

ENDS

¹ UN DESA (2020) 'COVID-19 and Older Persons: A Defining Moment for an Informed, Inclusive and Targeted Response'. Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/PB_68.pdf.

² OHCHR (27 March 2020) 'Unacceptable' – UN expert urges better protection of older persons facing the highest risk of the COVID-19 pandemic'. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25748>

³ OHCHR (27 March 2020) 'Unacceptable' – UN expert urges better protection of older persons facing the highest risk of the COVID-19 pandemic'. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25748>