



Submission to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in relation to its Statement of Strategy 2023-2026

*Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people.
Age Action advocates for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live
full, independent lives*

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Age Action is the leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people in Ireland. Age Action advocates for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives, based on the realisation of their rights and equality, recognising the diversity of their experience and situation. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by eliminating age discrimination, promoting positive ageing and securing their right to comprehensive and high-quality services.

Our submission relates largely to the Department's question about forthcoming challenges to be prioritised, as well as general comment. We want to take this opportunity to spotlight issues relevant to older persons, and in particular older farmers, which should be reflected in the Department's new Statement of Strategy.

In our 2022 report *Reframing Ageing: The State of Ageing*, we outlined the situation of older farmers. A quarter of those who are at work beyond the age of 65 work in agriculture.¹ Across Europe, nearly a third of all farmers are aged 65 or older.² Census 2016 found nearly 15,000 farmers in Ireland aged 65 or older.³ While the freedom and ability to remain at work can be a great source of purpose and independence, older farmers also face challenges. Older farmers and older persons continuing to live on farms may have particular needs because life on a farm can be hazardous at any age. Farmhouses are also more likely to be isolated from neighbours and main roads than other dwellings. Farming is often a solitary activity that can compound social isolation or loneliness. In recognition of the potential for social isolation, there have been calls for a new national social organisation aimed at addressing farmers' needs.⁴

Both within the context of working on a farm with family and/or others, or as an older person who continues to occupy a farmhouse as their dwellings, the Department's strategy should include actions to address the risk of elder abuse. This risk is likely to be heightened in circumstances where younger relatives pressure an older farmer to give up control over the farm business. The HSE's National Safeguarding Office found 3,480 cases of abuse against older persons (aged 65+) in 2020, representing 29.4% of all cases of abuse recorded. This included 812 cases of physical abuse, 107 cases of sexual abuse and 651 cases of financial abuse.⁵ The HSE report represents the minimum level of abuse that is occurring, as not all cases of abuse are reported.

In developing evidence-based policy and services, the Department should be conscious of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty as a central part of how it addresses the needs of older farmers. Within this it should note the importance of disaggregating data by age and gender to capture the situation of older farmers. Adjusting research methods to reflect increases in longevity and health can provide better evidence for policymakers. If we only think of older people as those aged 65+, we miss the significant differences between, for example, people in their late sixties and people in their mid-eighties, in areas such as health, housing, or income. The UN

¹ <https://data.cso.ie/table/EB051>

² <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/5/2533/htm>

³ <https://data.cso.ie/table/EB042>

⁴ http://whitakerinstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Policy-Brief_no-96_Shane-Conway.pdf

⁵ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/socialcare/safeguardingvulnerableadults/nationalsafeguardingofficereport2020.pdf>

Economic Commission for Europe recommended that, “published age groups need to reflect the increasing heterogeneity of the older population.”⁶ The other option, lumping everyone aged 65+ together in the same category, risks reinforcing ageist stereotypes and disappearing important information.

In recognition of the importance of older farmers, the Department should commit to the maintenance of offline options in delivering services or otherwise engaging with stakeholders. Age Action is concerned that many government consultations may effectively exclude older people who lack basic digital skills where there is an absence of accessible offline opportunities to contribution. This limits the opportunity for older persons to engage in active citizenship and also to feed into policy that directly affects them.

Age Action estimate that two-thirds of older persons (65%) are digitally excluded. This is either because they are not using the internet or because they lack the digital devices and/or necessary skills to navigate the internet safely. This limits their ability to access public services online.⁷ The Central Statistics Office conducts an annual Information Society survey on people’s internet access and use.⁸ Unfortunately, in relation to the use of e-government, the sample occurrence among those aged 75+ was too small for estimation. Persons aged 65-74 are the most likely to have not submitted official forms online because they did not know how; had data privacy concerns; or because someone else did it on their behalf. The issue of digital exclusion is particularly acute for older farmers as the entire CAP process has moved to an ‘online only’ model.⁹

⁶ https://unece.org/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/bur/2016/October/19Add1-Recommendations_on_Ageing-related_Statistics.pdf

⁷ https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/digital_inclusion_and_an_ageing_population.pdf

⁸ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-isshh/informationssocietystatistics-households2020/e-government/>

⁹ <https://www.independent.ie/business/farming/news/older-farmers-shut-out-as-supports-move-to-online-42330203.html>