



Submission to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media on Older Persons' Access and Inclusion in Sport.

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## 1. Introduction

Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people. Age Action works for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives. To achieve this, Age Action supports and advocates for equality and human rights for all older people. The research and narrative surrounding older people's participation in sport is dominated by 'biomedically informed policies emphasising the prescription of exercise as medicine and a universal approach to the promotion of active aging in later life.'<sup>1</sup> More research is required to determine why some people withdraw from sporting activity in older age including understanding cumulative disadvantage as a barrier to participation. Further research is also needed to understand the psychological and social benefits within socio cultural contexts in order to design strategies that promote the participation of older people in sport.<sup>2</sup> The 2020 WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour include recommendations specifically for older adults and for people living with disability, and confirm the multiple mental and social health benefits of regular physical activity for people of all ages, including older adults and all abilities, and provide guidance on how to design and deliver inclusive physical activity interventions to enable these populations to be more active.<sup>3</sup> In addition there is a data gap on the age distribution of those who work in sports, make decisions, coach, or officiate<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Mansfield L, Kay T, Anokye N and Fox-Rushby J (2019) Community Sport and the Politics of Aging: Co-design and Partnership Approaches to Understanding the Embodied Experiences of Low-Income Older People. *Front. Sociol.* 4:5. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2019.00005

<sup>2</sup> Jenkin, C.R., Eime, R.M., Westerbeek, H. et al. Sport and ageing: a systematic review of the determinants and trends of participation in sport for older adults. *BMC Public Health* 17, 976 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4970-8>

<sup>3</sup> Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/336656>

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Miranda Assumpção Picorelli, Leani Souza Máximo Pereira, Daniele Sirineu Pereira, Diogo Felício, Catherine Sherrington, Adherence to exercise programs for older people is influenced by program characteristics and personal factors: a systematic review, *Journal of Physiotherapy*, Volume 60, Issue 3, 2014, Pages 151-156,

## 2. Strategies to Support Participation

Across all WHO regions, both women and men become less active as they get older, despite clear evidence that being active benefits older adults in relation to preventing falls, remaining independent, reducing isolation and maintaining social links to improve psychosocial health. Walking is the most popular form of physical activity (particularly for older adults) and is a convenient, free, universal behaviour. WHO recommends all countries include a priority focus on retaining current levels and supporting more people to walk and cycle more frequently. Ensuring that there are safe and accessible pathways for people to walk and cycle, particularly in rural areas should be mainstreamed in any modification or development of the road infrastructure<sup>5</sup>. Sporting activities that target older people are hosted in numerous local sports partnerships under the local authority structures in addition to funding streams and programmes administered by Age and Opportunity and initiatives such as Cycling without Age Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Age Action's recommendations for the improvement of the participation in and access to sport by older people is made in the context of an equality and human rights analysis with an emphasis on the impact of digital exclusion and ageism.

1. Highlight the social component Connecting with older people and their priorities may be accomplished by presenting sporting activities as chances for enjoyment, socialisation, and isolation reduction as opposed to emphasising healthy ageing.

2. Value Lived Experience Greater effort should be made to involve older people in the design and implementation of programmes to ensure that their needs are met.

- 3 Address the practical obstacles The majority of older people rely on social protection for their income. As the State Pension has lost purchasing power and the payment has fallen behind inflation many older people are struggling to make ends meet. Cost of engaging and accessing sport is a

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<sup>5</sup> Global status report on physical activity 2022. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022. Available at <https://www.who.int/activities/ensuring-sports-for-all>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cyclingwithoutage.ie/>

significant barrier to participation not least membership fees, tickets and transportation particularly for people living in rural areas where access to public transport is limited compared to urban areas. Access to venues can also present a barrier to participation for people with mobility difficulties. Digital exclusion experienced by older people is a further barrier to their participation in and access to sport and is elaborated upon in section 2.3.

4 Challenge stereotypes – There are 1 million people over the age of 60 in Ireland with a diverse set of experiences and situations. Older people are not an homogeneous group which means different strategies are required to enable the successful participation in sport. It is important that policy responses and programme developments reflects the diversity of needs. In addition, challenging stereotypes necessitates addressing ageism which is elaborated upon in section 2.2.

## 2.2 Ageism as a barrier

The impact of ageism on the participation of older people in sport is an understudied area but given the systemic nature of ageism it is reasonable to conclude that it is a barrier.

Age Action is working to reframe how we think, feel and act towards older people. Ageism refers to the harm done through how we think (stereotypes), how we feel (prejudice) and how we act (discrimination) towards others or ourselves based on age. Ageism can be conscious or unconscious. Ageism occurs when people interact with one another (interpersonal), when organisations interact with individuals (institutional) and when people direct ageism towards themselves (self-directed). Age Action wanted to find out the extent to which people in Ireland hold ageist opinions, in a context where the World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified that ageism is a global concern.

When presented with seven ageist opinions, more than a third of adults (37%) agreed with two or more of them according to Age Action's public opinion poll, Are We Ageist? conducted by IrelandThinks.

Nearly one in four people reported having experienced discrimination on the grounds of age in recent years (23%). The experience of discrimination is more common among those aged 55 or older (28%), compared to those aged 18-54 (19%).

Of particular relevance to the issue of barriers to older person's participation in sport is self-directed ageism. Self-directed ageism is where people internalise ageist opinions that they have been repeatedly exposed to over their lives. Self-directed ageism can result in people conforming to their society's age stereotypes, which can affect their physical and mental health. The survey found evidence of high levels of self-directed ageism among older persons. Those aged 65+ were twice as likely to "strongly agree" that they had experienced age discrimination (10% versus 5% among those aged 18-64). People aged 75+ are nearly three times as likely to hold ageist opinions as those aged 55-64. Self-directed ageism is a likely contributing factor to the withdrawal of older people from actively participating in sporting activities.

Fostering interaction between people of different ages is an important strategy to tackle ageism. The Global Report on Ageism presents evidence intergenerational contact works to reduce ageism against older people. A systematic review, including evaluations of 21 different intergenerational contact interventions aimed at reducing ageism, found a modest effect on attitudes, including on stereotypes and prejudice, and a moderate effect on knowledge, including on information and misconceptions about the ageing process.<sup>7</sup> Access to and participation in sport provides a concrete avenue for intergenerational contact that should be systematically developed and monitored.

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<sup>7</sup> Ageism and Age Equality – Implementing the WHO Global Report on Ageism. Dublin: Age Action, September 2021. Available at [https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/ageism\\_and\\_age\\_equality\\_position\\_paper\\_1.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/ageism_and_age_equality_position_paper_1.pdf)

## 2.3 Digital Exclusion

Age Action is concerned about the impact of a digital first approach to provision of services including accessing sport. For example, Age Action is concerned about the exclusion (including self-exclusion) of some older persons from GAA matches due to the requirement to buy tickets online or to pay via 'cashless' transaction (e.g. bankcard) on the day. In addition, the recent announcement of several GAA matches being available on GAAGo rather than free to air is also a concern because many older people will simply not be in a position to watch these matches.

We know from the latest statistics that 6 in 10 adults aged 60 or older are not using the internet or have 'below basic' digital skills; that is, out of one million people aged 60 or older, approximately 380,000 are online with basic digital skills or above but 300,000 are not using the internet, and a further 320,000 are using the internet but with below basic skills<sup>8</sup>. As a result, many older persons are not comfortable or secure in making financial transactions online or managing their banking online. Many older people are not in a position to use a streaming service such as GAAGo because they lack the digital skills or they simply cannot afford the associated costs including the digital devices.

Many older persons prefer to manage their affairs through cash, as they are not able to check their bank balances online. Being able to buy tickets in advance from some retailers is not an acceptable alternative to paying cash on the day. The recent review of banking carried out by the Department of Finance, also highlighted the importance of cash to older persons in surveys, and AIB was quick to reverse its announcement of making 70 of its branches cashless.

Sporting events are a vital part of social inclusion. Sport promotes intergenerational connection which is one of the strategies identified by the World Health Organisation to combat ageism as previously stated.

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<sup>8</sup> Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population. Dublin: Age Action, October 2021. Available at [https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/digital\\_inclusion\\_and\\_an\\_ageing\\_population.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/digital_inclusion_and_an_ageing_population.pdf)

However, the issues of cashless turnstiles and the increasing number of sporting events available exclusively on streaming services, show that sometimes it is not just the physical accessibility but invisible barriers that are a problem. Digital exclusion is one of those invisible barriers.

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