



**Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on
Housing, Planning and Local Government**

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Good afternoon Cathaoirleach and to the other members of the committee.

Age Action would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to meet with you this afternoon.

Both the Programme for Partnership Government¹ and Goal Three of the National Positive Ageing Strategy² contain commitments to enable people to age in their own homes with dignity and independence.

Yet despite these commitments we have developed a system that seems to treat home supports more as a way to empty acute hospital beds than to enable an older person to age at home with dignity and independence, and for the accommodation to be person centred and to meet their changing needs.

To meet these commitments it is essential that the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme, as well as the other programmes under the Housing Adaption Grant, continues to be adequately resourced.

Implementation of the Grants

As indicated in Table 1, from 2010-2016³ volatility can be seen in the overall funding to the Scheme, the number of payments made and the average grant amount.

Between 2010 and 2013, funding for the Scheme fell sharply by 63 per cent and the number of grants fell by 61 per cent.

At the start of 2014, a number of changes were introduced to the eligibility criteria for the scheme. These included:

- a. A reduction in the size of the maximum grant available
- b. Changes in the income bands
- c. An increase in the age of eligibility from 60 to 66 years

¹ The Programme for Partnership Government recognises the importance of being “able to cater for the needs of a more diverse ageing population who want to live independent and active lives in their communities”.

² The National Positive Ageing Strategy states that it is the policy of the Government to “enable people to age with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes and communities for as long as possible”.

³ Most recent data available.

Table 1 – Housing Aid for Older People Grants

	Number of Payments	Change in no. of payments %	Value €000	Change in funding (%)	Average Grant	Change in average grant
2008	1,439		6,421		4,462	
2009	4,294	198%	19,345	201%	4,505	1%
2010	7,205	68%	30,775	59%	4,271	-5%
2011	6,510	-10%	27,098	-12%	4,163	-3%
2012	4,848	-26%	19,910	-27%	4,107	-1%
2013	2,815	-42%	11,247	-44%	3,995	-3%
2014	5,648	101%	13,498	20%	2,390	-40%
2015	3,127	-45%	11,267	-17%	3,603	51%
2016	3,425	10%	12,647*	12%	3,693	2%

Source: Housing Aid for Older people Grant by area 2008 to date. See <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/social-and-affordable/other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics>

* Noting that this 2016 figure relates only to funding provided directly from the Department and the Local Property Tax allocation.

The Government argued these changes were necessary to target the funding towards those most in need.

It is also important for members to recall that the terms of reference for the 2013 review that led to these changes explicitly included the then recessionary economic climate and shrinking budget as the context.

Those circumstances no longer exist and, consequently, we believe the scheme needs to be re-examined in the light of the newer economic climate.

However, the impact of these changes has meant that the poorest of older people now receive a reduced maximum grant while being expected to pay for a greater percentage of the work.

For example, a household with a yearly income of less than €30,000 may be eligible for a maximum grant of €8,000 or 95% of the cost of the works (whichever is larger).

At the maximum grant and percentage rate, this low-income household will need to find funding of €421. This represents a substantial burden for someone living on a State Pension.

In 2014, while the level of funding increased by 20 per cent, the number of grants awarded increased by over 100 per cent.

This indicates that the funding is being spread more thinly as the average grant awarded fell by 40 per cent year-on-year. By 2016, there was a welcome increase in overall funding.

Age Action feels strongly that this scheme is not adequately resourced. We ask that the changes introduced to the scheme in January 2014 be reversed to ensure better access to grants for disadvantaged older people.

While the additional €5m announced by the Government in Budget 2018 for overall housing adaption grants is certainly welcome there is no clarity yet as to how this will be spent across the three funding programmes.

In our Budget 2018 proposals we sought an increase of €18 million to restore funding for housing aid for older people.

In the context of reversing the 2014 changes, which would create greater demand for the grant, we believe this is still a fair and sensible proposal.

Inconsistency in Application

Calls to Age Action's Helpline frequently highlight inconsistencies in the implementation of these grants.

Many of our callers to the Age Action Helpline find the complexity of the application process difficult to navigate and they experience delays in both assessment and approval.

This can be very stressful and upsetting as in our experience most applications are made in emergency and crisis situations.

Different Local Authorities interpret the rules of the various schemes in different ways. Age Action calls for greater clarity and consistency in the administration of the schemes. We would welcome a review of the schemes with particular regard to the process and implementation across Local Authorities.

Unmet need

The current policy of prioritising the provision of Housing Adaption Grants to facilitate discharge from hospitals on an emergency basis means older people in hospital can access them more easily than those in the community.

This makes it harder for older people in the community (for example, with non-emergency needs) to have their care needs met.

Enabling older people to remain at home for longer through investment in these schemes can deliver savings by ensuring fewer older people require preventable hospitalisation or residential care.

Towards a solution

We need to facilitate community living, mitigate preventable hospitalisations and, if deemed suitable, provide an alternative to nursing homes admittances for those already in hospital and awaiting discharge.

We look forward to working with you all to make this a reality.

ENDS