



**Pre-Budget Submission 2018**  
**Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment**

*"I am 89 years of age and I live alone. Now I don't feel so alone. I can communicate not only with friends in Ireland but also in other countries."*



*The work of the Age Action policy team is supported by the Scheme to Support National Organisations, funded via the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, and administered by Pobal.*

## **1. Introduction**

Age Action is the leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people in Ireland. 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.

We want to make Ireland the best country in the world in which to grow old and we work with older people to build a society free of ageism where their rights are secured.

This submission outlines our recommendations to the Communications, Climate Action and Environment with regard to the budget allocation for 2018.

Separate to this we will make individual submissions to the following Government departments:

- Department of Health;
- Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government;
- Department of Employment and Social Protection;
- Department of Education and Skills;
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Irish Aid).

## 2. Addressing Digital Exclusion amongst Older People

*“This course is a brilliant idea. It was the first time in my life I felt comfortable coming to a computer class.”*

*“I would never think at my age of learning computers. What a joy it is for me now that I can email, Skype and Google any topic. High marks to Age Action for this service. ”*

*“I am 89 years of age and I live alone. Now I don’t feel so alone. I can communicate not only with friends in Ireland but also in other countries.”*

*“A really great comfort to us both, to know so much now that we have a confidence for the future and will not feel that we have been bypassed. Thank you all so much for what you voluntarily have give us and many others.”*

The National Positive Ageing Strategy commits to “promote access to a wide range of opportunities for continued learning and education for older people”<sup>1</sup>. Age Action plays an important role in achieving this through our Getting Started and Lifelong Learning programmes.

Digital literacy is now a necessity for accessing health and welfare information, for using online services, managing one’s finances and maintaining contact with family and friends. A critical challenge for society is the pace of change towards doing the majority of our business online.

For older people, this challenge is even greater as half of those aged 60 to 74 (more than 260,000 people) have never used the internet<sup>2</sup>. Among those aged 75 and over, the figure is negligible at only 3 per cent.

In 2007, the proportion of those aged between 60 and 74 years never using the internet was substantially higher at 77 per cent. While the gap between on-liners and “non-liners” has narrowed Ireland lags behind other EU countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health (2013) *National Positive Ageing Strategy* p.20

<sup>2</sup> CSO (2016) ICT Usage by Individuals -

<http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=ICA05&PLanguage=0>

A September 2015 Eurostat report found that only 37 per cent of Irish people aged 65 to 74 use the internet, compared to 70 per cent in Britain and an average across the EU of 42 per cent.

Since being introduced in 2008 the Benefit Programme(s) helped people to learn new skills, use the internet and access online resources. The programme also supported wider Government objectives such as encouraging and assisting people to use online public services and online banking.

Funding provided by the department to community and voluntary groups for computer training through its Benefit funding programme has played a critical role in closing the digital exclusion gap.

In 2017, the Department launched a new fund called the Digital Skills for Citizens Training Scheme with the aim of training 25,000 “non-liners” nationwide. Age Action’s Getting Started Programme was successful in applying for this fund and will train 2,461 non-liners in 2017.

Since 2006 we have trained more than 30,000 older people in basic IT skills on a one-to-one basis. All our tutors are volunteers. By using a one-to-one approach, learners can go at their own pace and tuition can be tailored to each individual’s needs.

Feedback on our programmes has been almost universally positive with 99.7 per cent of our learners saying they would recommend the course to others and 98.7 per cent of our volunteer tutors rated as either Very Good or Excellent.

Currently Age Action has a nationwide waiting list of more than 1,600 people. A high proportion of our learners are also interested in repeating the training, for example, people with new devices such as tablets who previously participated in classes using a laptop.

The programme also tackles the social exclusion that many older people may feel, helping them to stay active, healthy and less isolated. Many of our learners have purchased

computers and also now shop online which has a direct economic impact. Getting older people online will also allow them to access e-government services.

However, despite the success of Benefit and the new Digital Skills for Citizens Training Scheme, the commitment to halve the number of “non-liners” by 2016 has not been achieved.

Furthermore, while we understand that the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment may wish to continue the Digital Skills for Citizens Training Scheme after 2017, there are no set plans in place.

While the fund provides an additional two hours of training and an increase in the grant per person, it does not allow an older person to complete any more than 10 hours of training.

This limits older learners continuing their online journey as many thrive in the one-to-one learning environment and find it very difficult to move onto a group training session.

Older people should be able to attend further one-to-one sessions to support their initial learning but, under the present funding, this is not permitted under any circumstances.

Under the current scheme if an older learner falls ill and must stop attending the classes, while they can resume when they have recovered, they cannot start again from the beginning as many would prefer, which can also make learning difficult.

The main challenge that the Getting Started programme is dealing with is the issue of people wanting to do further training beyond what the scheme funds. With our very limited resources, it is difficult to offer support to these people to continue their learning, improve their skills and genuinely become an “onliner”.

**Recommendations:**

1. The Department should allocate funds for a programme specifically targeted at learners over the age of 60 that allows them to avail of more than ten hours training if necessary. This would enable older people to engage meaningfully in online activities.
2. The Department should set the Digital Skills for Citizens Training Scheme funding on a multi-annual basis. As it stands there is no commitment of funding for 2018.
3. Additional funding should be allocated to support one-to-one training due to the additional costs associated with that approach and in recognition of its greater benefit over group settings.
4. It is imperative that older people continue to use their skills outside of the classroom. The Government must roll out a comprehensive broadband strategy in rural and urban areas.

#### 4. Addressing Energy Poverty

*“Like all older people I find it hard to keep heat on during cold weather as it’s so expensive”.*

*“My house was built in 1974 so has not the best heat retention and is actually too big for me.”*

*“No payment is made towards oil by the State. It may be a fossil fuel etc. BUT it is the only means of heating that many older people have and it should not be treated differently to electricity or gas for allowances.”*

The experience of energy poverty among older people is particularly acute for a variety of reasons. These include<sup>3</sup>:

- A greater risk of cardiovascular and respiratory illness from cold and damp houses;
- More time spent in the home;
- A greater dependency on dirtier fuels for heating;
- A reliance on small fixed incomes, therefore any increase in fuel prices has a disproportionate impact;
- A tendency to live in older, less energy efficient homes;
- A higher level of disability and chronic ill-health are reported amongst this age group.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this, consumer behaviour among older people means they are less likely to switch providers due to brand loyalty. Lower rates of access to the internet, along with an aversion to falling into arrears, can mean many older people do not benefit from increased competition in the energy market<sup>5</sup>.

A longer-term strategy is to tackle energy poverty through increasing the energy efficiency of people’s homes. The commitment to this in the department’s Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty is noted. The longer term vision of the Warmth and Wellbeing scheme to improve health outcomes is particularly welcome.

The approach adopted by this scheme takes into consideration the public health benefits of addressing energy poverty along with taking a cross-departmental approach to addressing the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Goodman, P. McAvoy, H. Cotter, N. Monahan, E. Barret, E. Browne, S and Zeka, A. (2011). *Fuel Poverty, Older People and Cold Weather*. Dublin: DIT/IPH.

<sup>4</sup> Ageing Well Network (2012) *The New Agenda on Ageing - To Make Ireland the Best Country to Grow Old In* <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/09/new-ageing-agenda-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Cotter, N. et al (2012) Coping with the cold- exploring relationships between cold housing, health and social wellbeing in a sample of older people in Ireland. *Quality in Ageing and Older People* 12(1):8-47.

The Better Energy: Warmer Homes Scheme administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) is also integral to achieving this and is a buffer against energy poverty for older people. The introduction of smart metering will also encourage people to be more energy efficient.

It is imperative that home energy efficiency programmes continue to be funded and that they are targeted towards those on low-incomes and those who will experience the worst effects of living in energy poverty.

In its Budget 2018 submission the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP)<sup>6</sup> highlights its concerns about the level of take -p amongst those who most need it. For example, SVP highlights that while approximately 400,000 people are in receipt of fuel allowance, just 122,000 people have benefited from the Warmer Homes Scheme.

We support SVP's recommendations that there needs to be a concerted effort to raise awareness about the scheme through a 'tailored dissemination and outreach initiative / campaign towards the vast number of households that are eligible to avail of the Warmer Homes Scheme and those who are most vulnerable'(p. 13).

We also support SVP's recommendation to 'pilot Community Energy Advisors to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency and advice programmes'<sup>7</sup>.

It is also important that the original objective of the carbon tax as revenue-neutral is achieved by using the funds it raises to address the issue of energy poverty. Currently, this tax is deeply regressive and it is imperative that low-income households and those at risk of energy poverty are not affected by future increases in the carbon tax.

Age Action believes that energy poverty can only be addressed effectively through a joint response across key government departments, most specifically the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection.

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<sup>6</sup> Society of St Vincent de Paul (2017) Bridging the Gap Pre-Budget Submission 2018 - <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/db38cf29-4cc3-4243-a10d-75679fcd3a35/SVP-Pre-Budget-Submission-2018-Bridging-the-Gap.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> p.13

**Recommendation:**

5. Ensure the Strategy to Combat Energy continues to be adequately resourced and key actions implemented.
6. Implement SVP's recommendations regarding raising awareness about the Warmer Homes Scheme:

*'Invest in an analysis of which initiatives are proving most effective, including identify barriers to uptake of schemes. Based on this analysis, design an appropriate and tailored dissemination and outreach initiative / campaign towards the vast number of households that are eligible to avail of the Warmer Homes Scheme and those who are most vulnerable.*

*'Pilot Community Energy Advisors to engage and inform hard to reach energy users who would most benefit from energy efficiency and advice programmes<sup>8</sup>*

7. Meet the promise of using revenue raised by the Carbon Tax to address energy poverty, which adheres to the original objective of the tax to be revenue-neutral.

**For further information please contact:**

Justin Moran, Head of Advocacy and Communications, Age Action, 30/31 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2

T: 01-475 6989; E: [advocacy@ageaction.ie](mailto:advocacy@ageaction.ie)

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<sup>8</sup> p.14