

# AgeingMatters

in Ireland

## Cork members meet Minister

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**PUBLISHER** Age Action Ireland Ltd

**ADDRESS** 30-31 Lower Camden St, Dublin 2

**TELEPHONE** (01) 475-6989

**FAX** (01) 475-6011

**EMAIL** info@ageaction.ie

**WEBSITE** www.ageaction.ie

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**CHIEF EXECUTIVE PUBLISHING & INFORMATION** Justin Moran & Gerard Scully

**DESIGN** Catherine Osborn

■ Cover photo: Minister Jim Daly TD meeting Cork Glór group members.

## Opinion

# Positive legacy of Storm Emma



John Church

Last month I was talking to a colleague who told me a lovely story about her mother who lives alone in a rural part of Kildare.

At the height of Storm Emma, when the conditions were at their worst, not just one but three different sets of neighbours went out of their way to check in to make sure she was okay and that she had everything she needed.

Not far from where I live, a group visited each and every single flat in a housing complex for older people to see if they needed anything and to leave their phone numbers in case of an emergency.

Sometimes, it seems we need a bit of adversity to realise that there is still a great deal of strength in our communities, that people in Ireland still do go that extra mile to look after complete strangers, as well as their own.

### Volunteers

In particular, Storm Emma was a time when we appreciated again the contributions that volunteers make in Ireland. Our own Care & Repair volunteers were out before the storm hit helping people prepare for the weather by ensuring their heating was working.

Members of the Order of Malta were out in atrocious conditions providing first aid support, transport for people who were unwell and community care.

Charity workers with homeless organisations like the Peter McVerry Trust were out in the wind and the snow trying everything to find anyone who was homeless during the storm and to get them indoors.

One volunteer said that a homeless person they tracked down could not get over the fact that someone would care enough to try to find him in those conditions.

### Performed heroically

And it wasn't just volunteers who performed heroically. Staff stayed overnight in hospitals and nursing homes, away from their families, to make sure that patients and residents were cared for.

Homecare workers and other carers risked dangerous and treacherous driving conditions to get to the people who needed them.

It was inspiring to see so many people standing up for those in need during Storm Emma but maybe we shouldn't need a storm or a crisis to be willing to reach out.

People who are sick, or lonely or isolated don't just need help when the weather turns, they need it all the time.

And organisations, including Age Action, will always need volunteers able to give their time to help older people in Ireland.

— John Church



▲ It was the strength of Age Action's members, like those at this meeting in Cork, that made this success possible.

# Age Action members win Fuel Allowance victory

**Pressure from Age Action members persuaded the Government to make a double Fuel Allowance payment to help pensioners on low incomes heat their homes during Storm Emma.**

In advance of the storm, there were confusing messages from Government spokespersons who advised people to keep the heat on all week but did not seem to consider how affordable this was for someone on a small income.

Age Action was the first organisation to call for a double payment, raising it in national and local media, and it was picked up by prominent opposition TDs including Fianna Fáil's Deputy Willie O'Dea and Sinn Féin's Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Age Action spokespersons

pointed out that in Britain a special Cold Weather Payment of £25 a week is available when temperatures drop below freezing for a number of days.

The Taoiseach initially refused but calls from Age Action spokespersons and members across the country persuaded the Government to think again.

Less than 24 hours after the Taoiseach's statement the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection Regina Doherty TD confirmed there would be a double Fuel Allowance payment.

## Warm welcome

"The decision by Minister Regina Doherty TD to issue a double Fuel Allowance payment was warmly welcomed by tens of thousands of pensioners on low incomes," said Justin Moran, Head of Advocacy and Communications with Age Action.

"Even at the best of times many older people are worried about the cost of heating their homes and we hear from people who spend their days in libraries or even on public transport because they are so scared of rising energy prices.

"The double payment in the Fuel Allowance gave them some reassurance that they could afford to keep the heat on in a week when they really needed it."

The Fuel Allowance is a means-tested, weekly, payment of €22.50 made to 338,000 households to help them heat their homes during the coldest months.

During the recession, the duration of the payment was reduced from 32 weeks to 26. Though an additional week is being provided this year Age Action is still calling for the remaining five weeks to be fully restored.



▲ Minister Regina Doherty TD speaking at a recent pension protest.

# Government announces talks on radical pensions reforms

The Government has announced public consultations will take place shortly on radical proposals to reform the State Pension system, which were published at the end of February in a report entitled *A Roadmap to Pensions Reform*.

One of the most significant changes is the introduction of a new, mandatory, second-tier pension system in which everyone without an existing private pension would have to enrol.

The State Pension would also be changed with a new 'Total Contributions Approach' (TCA). Under TCA, a person's contributory pension will be proportionate to the contributions they make, with fair regard for periods of child rearing, full-time caring, and periods in receipt of social protection payments.

"Thankfully, we are all now living longer and many children born in Ireland in 2018 will live to be over 100," said the Taoiseach as he announced

the roadmap.

"This is a very welcome development. Nonetheless, a population that is living longer brings its own policy challenges, not least in terms of social insurance and in ensuring the future sustainability and security of the State Pension system.

## More equitable State Pension

"It is important and timely that we now move to establish a more equitable and transparent State Pension system. To do this, we will put in place important pension reforms and also promote better levels of private pension coverage to help supplement future retirement incomes."



## Age Action's response

There are certainly some positive proposals in the reform roadmap published by the Government.

A key Age Action demand for some time has been for the pension to be index linked to 35 per cent of average earnings and it seems the Government is willing to look at something very similar.

The pension age is due to rise to 68 by 2028 and there had been speculation there would be more increases. The roadmap rules out raising the pension age further until at least 2035 and will put a system in place to ensure any rise in the age would be based on scientific evidence.

We are also glad to see a homemaking credit being introduced to support people whose contributions might not entitle them to a full pension because of time they spent out of the workforce.



▲ SIPTU retired members campaigning for a fair State Pension.

### Concerns

But there are also some worrying aspects. On an initial examination of the proposals, for example, it seems the TCA approach will mean a lot of people without full contribution records might lose out.

There is also no mention of any transition period when people might be able to choose to stick with the current system or to use the new one.

The new mandatory scheme is also unclear. Who is going to run it? What are the fees going to be? How will existing tax reliefs for private pensioners work with the new system?

Age Action has already written to the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection Regina Doherty TD looking for more information on what is proposed and suggesting ways to improve the public consultation process.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection Regina Doherty TD outlined the need for the new Automatic Enrolment system to support those without retirement savings to supplement their State Pension.

"It is increasingly evident that most Irish workers are not saving enough, or indeed at all, for their retirement years," she said. "Many people will be faced with a serious reduction in their living standards when they retire – a fall in income they clearly do not want.

"Having examined the options and looked at international experience, the Government has decided that a new Automatic Enrolment supplementary

retirement savings system, where the individual retains the freedom to opt-out, is the best approach to take.

"When introducing this system, we will ensure that those on low to middle incomes receive financial support from both the Government and their employer."

The Minister also confirmed that, "feedback received from private citizens and representative groups will be used to inform Government in determining the detailed framework for the Total Contributions Approach and the preferred operational structure and design for the automatic enrolment system."

# Nursing home residents still hit by unfair charges

“Patricia told us about her mother’s nursing home, which demanded an additional payment of €2,173 after 30 months even though her mother had not been participating in the activities for which she was being charged due to her age and frailty.”

Patricia’s case is just one of a number highlighted in a recent Age Action report sent to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC), which is examining nursing home contracts.

A different report published by Age Action last year first highlighted the scandal of Fair Deal nursing home residents facing additional charges – on top of the contributions they are already making – for services they may not even be able to use.

“We are very concerned at the unclear position of many nursing home residents and their relatives, who find themselves unsure what services, fees, costs and charges they are contracted to pay nursing homes,” explained Health Policy Officer Audry Deane.

“These fees are in addition to the amount which the nursing home receives for their care under the Nursing Home Support Scheme (NHSS).

### Not acceptable

“It’s simply not acceptable for people in these positions to be paying for services and activities which they are not able to access due to their frailty and level of dependency.

“This can be a significant amount of money for someone on the State Pension who must already hand over 80 per cent of their pension under the Fair Deal scheme.”

Age Action has also received reports of people being charged for services they may already be entitled to free of charge as medical card holders. Other nursing home residents have reported they were charged for attending religious activities.

The CCPC investigation of nursing home con-



▲ Minister Jim Daly TD with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar.

tracts is welcome but more needs to be done to improve the Fair Deal scheme and protect older people and their families from unfair nursing home charges.

Age Action recently wrote again to the Minister of State for Older People Jim Daly TD looking for action on allowing nursing home residents to ‘opt out’ of activities they cannot participate in and to allow less well-off residents to retain more of their incomes.



◀ A special An Post stamp issued in 2013 to celebrate diversity in the Garda Síochána.

## Older people need new Garda strategy

**Age Action has called for the 2010 Garda Síochána strategy for older people to be reviewed and updated to provide more support to older people**

The call was made in a submission to the Commission on the Future of Policing and was one of a number of recommendations put forward to support older people.

Although, statistically, people over the age of 65 are least likely to be the victims of crimes, they are also most likely to be worried or fearful of becoming a victim.

"There is a very real fear of crime among older people in Ireland," said Senior Policy Officer Corona Joyce.

"An older person is often more vulnerable to a physical assault and may take longer – emotionally, socially and physically – to recover. There are large numbers

of older people who live alone, particularly in rural communities.

"The decision to close almost 140 Garda stations since 2011 also undermined the sense of security that they provided for many older people."

Age Action welcomed the 2010 Garda Síochána strategy for older people, which was produced following extensive consultation with organisations representing older people and frontline Gardaí.

### **New updated strategy**

"We need a new, updated, strategy that considers the growing numbers of older people, an increased awareness of elder abuse, concerns among older people about online fraud and

other developments since 2010," Corona Joyce explained.

"We would like to see specific liaison officers for older people and more supports for community alert and neighbourhood watch schemes.

"The Gardaí also need to be doing more to promote the Senior Alert Scheme. Only two per cent of people who use the alarms heard about them from the Gardaí.

"And we shouldn't forget that older people can also be part of the solution. In Monaghan, Cavan and Meath older people are being trained by the Gardaí as Crime Prevention Ambassadors.

"They visit other older people to provide information, give advice and raise awareness of any security concerns. It would be great to see that programme go nationwide."

# Harris orders review of hospital parking charges

The Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD, has ordered a national review of hospital car parking charges.

It followed the revelation last month in the *Irish Independent* that public hospitals collected nearly €13 million in a single year from the unpopular charges, which have been described as a 'tax on the sick'.

The charges have also been the target of a campaign led by the Irish Cancer Society who have highlighted the pressure they put on the families of patients who are receiving long-term care.

Most hospitals have outsourced their car parking service to private companies. The charges are set locally and there is no central control over how the services might operate.

They can also be a substantial source of funding for some hospitals. Cork University Hospital, for example, charges €2.70 an hour up to a maximum of €15. The charges brought in €3.1 million for the hospital in 2016.

## Need for guidelines

"I know that some hospitals do take into account the pressure that these charges can put on



▲ Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD

patients and families who are dealing with illness, particularly long-term illness, and have measures in place to alleviate this pressure," said Minister Harris.

"I have now asked the HSE to carry out a review of hospital car parking charges, with the aim of establishing clear national guidelines on this area for the first time."

Age Action members in Galway highlighted the cost of hospital parking in 2015 in a report on outpatient services in University College Hospital Galway.

Many older people depend on the State Pension of €238

a week, even less for those not entitled to a full pension.

The Galway Glór group pointed out that excessive parking costs hit their wallets and add to the stress of what can already be a difficult day.

Age Action will be making a submission to the HSE review to highlight how the parking charges affect older people and their families.

**If you would like to share your experience of parking charges in public hospitals please email us at [info@ageaction.ie](mailto:info@ageaction.ie) or call us on 01 475 6989.**





◀ Some medical card holders have been charged €20 for each blood test.

## Confusion over blood tests fees

**Age Action is investigating confusing reports that suggest medical card holders are being refused refunds for blood tests carried out by their GPs.**

“The HSE and the Department of Health are clear that GPs cannot charge medical card holders for routine blood tests,” said Age Action’s Gerry Scully.

“Unfortunately, many GPs are charging €10 and €20 for each test which can be a lot of money for a pensioner who might have a number of illnesses.”

These charges have been around for years and the response from the HSE was that people who were charged for blood tests like that could claim a refund from their local HSE office.

### Reports of refused refunds

However, last month Age Action started to receive reports on social media from people who said they were refused help in getting refunds by the HSE.

One man said he had bloods taken twice by his GP in Limerick and was charged €20 each time. He said he phoned his local health office and “was told no reimbursement”.

Another patient said her blood test was cancelled when she did not have money with her to pay her GP for the tests.

She said she made an official complaint and was told that the “HSE will not reimburse any charges and although everyone knows [the] GP should not charge for blood tests, there is nothing HSE can do about it”.

“They did not help at all and we still are charged €20 every time,” she finished.

“Forcing people to go to the HSE office for a €10 refund was never the answer,” said Gerry Scully. “It was impossible for people with mobility difficulties or who lived far away from the office, but at least there was some sort of system in place.

“From our initial investigations it appears that in at least a couple of HSE offices people are no longer being supported in applying for these refunds and we’re working now to see if this is a wider problem.”

**If you, or a family member, have a medical card and have been charged for a blood test, please contact the information team at 01 475 6989 or email [helpline@ageaction.ie](mailto:helpline@ageaction.ie).**



▲ Age Action members in Cork putting pressure on politicians ahead of General Election 2016.

Photo: E R Lyons

# Fighting for **fairness**

**Across Ireland Age Action members are gearing up again for the annual fight for a fair budget for older people.**

Even though the budget is months away, preparation have already started in some Government departments and Age Action's own consultation with members is taking place right now.

"We have to make sure that what we're asking the Government for is what our members really want," explained Senior Policy Officer Corona Joyce. "It is our supporters, our readers, who need to set the agenda for older people in this budget.

"We're asking all of our *Ageing Matters* readers to fill out the survey you should have received with your magazine this month and send it back to us. Tell us what you want to see in October's budget."

Developing Age Action's pre budget submissions is only the start of the campaign. Once they are

sent into the various Government departments, Age Action staff will be meeting with TDs, senators, ministers and civil servants to argue on behalf of older people in Ireland.

## **Political strength**

"The key thing, the absolutely most important thing to remember, is that we only get the budget we need if we are strong enough to demand it," explained Age Action's Head of Advocacy and Communications Justin Moran.

"Our policy team is going to work with our members and supporters to make sure we're putting forward proposals based on what older people really need and want.

"But the real battle will be won or lost by our members. Every phone call, letter and email to your TD telling them you're backing Age Action and that you want a fair budget for older people increases

our chances of getting a result that will make a real difference for older people.”

Last year Age Action Glór group members in Cork and Galway met with local politicians. Many more Age Action members phoned or wrote to their local representatives.

This year it is hoped more older people will get

involved and encourage their family members to join the campaign as well.

Age Action is also working to organise a day of action in Dublin at the end of September, just before the budget. Alongside Active Retirement Ireland and ALONE the plan is to bring older people to lobby their TDs outside Leinster House.

## What we achieved last year:



▲ Older people have a powerful voice when they use it as shown by the medical card protests. Photo Dara Mac Donail

- An additional €37 million for home care packages and transitional care beds.
  - An extra week for the Fuel Allowance, bringing it up to 27 weeks, and a change to allow people to get the payment in two lump sums.
  - A €5 increase in the top rate of the State Pension – delayed to March 2018.
  - The introduction in June 2018 of a weekly Telephone Support Allowance of €2.50 for people living alone and who qualify for the Fuel Allowance.
  - A reduction in prescription charges for medical card holders under 70.
- And what we would have liked to see:**
- A substantial increase in the Living Alone Allowance.
  - More funding for homecare – the extra resources are welcome but far short of what is needed.
  - Restore the Bereavement Grant.
  - An increase in medical card thresholds.

## We want to hear from you

As well as the survey enclosed with Ageing Matters, we are organising budget workshops around Ireland to help set the priorities for older people in Budget 2019.

- **Dublin** – Wednesday 11 April at 10.30 in the Carmelite Centre on Aungier Street.
- **Castlebar** – Monday 16 April at 10.30 in Lough Lannagh House.
- **Cork** – Tuesday 24 April at 11.00 in the Imperial Hotel on South Mall.
- **Galway** – Monday 30 April at 12.30 in the Menlo Park Hotel on the Headford Road.

If you would like to attend, please contact our senior policy officer, Corona Joyce, on 01 475 6989 or email [corona.joyce@ageaction.ie](mailto:corona.joyce@ageaction.ie).

Dear Age Action,

During Storm Emma I heard about the Community Welfare Officer and the payments that might be available to older people who were affected by the recent bad weather. Can you explain how these payments work?

Niall from Sligo

## Getting **help** from the Community Welfare Officer

The two payments mentioned during Storm Emma are the Urgent Needs Payment and the Exceptional Needs Payment, writes **Gerry Scully**.

These are both administered by an official called the Community Welfare Officer, which some of our older readers might remember used to be called the Relieving Officer. They are based in local health centres or clinics.

It is their job to provide funding for people on limited means who suddenly need to cope with an unforeseen emergency.

### Urgent Needs Payment

The Urgent Needs Payment is for people who are affected by emergencies, such as fires, flooding or other severe weather events. It covers items such as food, clothing or alternative temporary accommodation.

It is means tested and they will look at your entire means, including income, savings and property excluding your family home.

You will need the PPSN for everyone in your household and



▲ Information officers Michael Keating and Phil Cooley running an information stall in Tallaght, Dublin.

it is important to know that this payment may be recoverable if your situation improves.

### Exceptional Needs Payment

This is a once-off payment for dealing with an unforeseen life event such as setting up your home for the first time, the cost of visiting family in hospital or in prison or, in exceptional circumstances, for helping with funeral costs.

You may also be entitled to get the payment if you find yourself hit with an unexpectedly high energy bill and this might be something to bear in mind in the

aftermath of Storm Emma.

Again, this is a means tested payment and you will have to supply a PPSN for everyone in the household.

The decisions of a CWO cannot be appealed but they can be reviewed by the Social Welfare Allowance Review Officer for the office which made the original decision.

For more information, or for assistance in making an application for either of these payments, you can ring our Information Service on 01 475 6989 or email us at [helpline@ageaction.ie](mailto:helpline@ageaction.ie).



▲ Age Action members and staff after a successful meeting with Minister Jim Daly TD.

# Cork Age Action members meet Minister for Older People

Members of Age Action's Cork Glór group met last month with Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People Jim Daly TD to discuss the Living Alone Allowance, the need for better homecare supports and more housing schemes for older people.

"We were delighted that the Minister was able to visit our Cork office to see the work Age Action is doing in the county and to meet with our members," said John O'Mahony of Age Action South.

"They wanted to talk to him about the need to provide more support to older people living alone who can often see their incomes halved after they lose a spouse and who then really struggle to meet their costs.

"There was also a discussion about the need for more investment in homecare and for the Government to plan ahead by developing more housing schemes for older people.

"Our members felt the Minister really listened to them and engaged in a very open and direct way. They'll be hoping that the budget later this year will show the Government is paying attention to older people when they highlight the challenges of being

an older person in Ireland today."

## Living Alone

The need for a substantial increase in the Living Alone Allowance was highlighted by Age Action last year in its pre-budget submission.

Research highlighted by the organisation showed that costs for a pensioner living alone were around 80 per cent of the costs for a pensioner couple yet the Living Alone Allowance remains at just nine euro.

Age Action Glór (the Irish word for 'voice') groups are organised in a number of locations around Ireland. They consist of Age Action members and supporters who want to campaign for better services for older people nationally and in their locality.

There are currently Glór groups organised in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Charleville and Castlebar.



▲ Ending with a flourish

Photo: Kyran O'Brien

# Pat's **definitely** got talent

**It was an Age Action member who stole the show on the first night of TV3's *Ireland's Got Talent* in February when Pat Glynn walked confidently onto the stage to perform *Blueberry Hill* but as he explained to *Ageing Matters* he is no stranger to the music scene.**

Pat was born in 1938 and grew up in his beloved Cavan where he spent his youth and attended Corlurgan National School and he is still proud to this day of having been taught by a wonderful teacher named Mrs Crotty, who taught his mother before him.

As he tells it, from an early age

he loved music and maybe it was inevitable even then that he was destined to be on national television bringing crowds of people to their feet.

## **Particularly jazz**

"I always liked music, particularly jazz," said Pat, "and what happened was that when I was 17

and starting college a friend of mine joined a music class and I went along with him. All the classes were full except for the trumpet so that's the instrument I had to learn!

"Seventeen is actually a fairly late age to be picking up an instrument like that but I really enjoyed it and started playing part-time, doing gigs in local tennis clubs and fundraisers and things like that."

After college Pat continued to play informally with friends and even got some gigs with some of the country's top showbands

from time to time.

He still loves performing, playing in nursing homes near to where he now lives in Drumcondra and with the Cavan Big Band, where he first got the idea for his act for *Ireland's Got Talent*.

"Well, I noticed the advertisements they had in the papers and they emphasised that they wanted people of all ages to apply and a friend of mine suggested I go for it. I sent them in a video, a backing track and some pictures and then I was invited in for the first round of auditions."

Pat was one of at least seven or eight hundred people who attended the first round of auditions in the RDS Simmonscourt.

He survived the cut and got through a second round at the Tommy Leddy Theatre in Drogheda before he was invited to perform before Louis Walsh and the rest of the judges.

### In his stride

But while singing in front of hundreds of people, on television, in front of top celebrities, would terrify most of us, Pat was able to take it all in his stride.

"We were waiting a long time before we could go on and sometimes I did just want to get out and get it over with but I find I'm not nervous if it's something I know I can do," he said. "When I know I can sing the song and play the tune, I feel everything is okay."

"Besides," he jokes, "one of the advantages maybe of a bit of seniority is that you don't feel too nervous because you're old enough not to



worry about the result!"

Pat's powerful singing voice and impressive dance moves wowed the audience, who gave him a standing ovation, and the judges who gave him a unanimous four votes to go through to the next round. Did he expect such a response?

"I hoped I'd do well but, to be honest, I didn't think I would get through, but that wasn't really the reason for doing it. I just wanted to take part, to have the chance to do what I love before a live audience and I was delighted to

get a video of myself performing like that just to have for myself."

However, we don't need to worry about the fame going to Pat's head as his friends were quick to make sure his feet stayed on the ground.

"One of my friends said I should take the video and send it to some of the cruise ships and maybe they might want to bring me on as a performer," he said. "I asked him did he really think so and what kind of cruise ship would he suggest? The Titanic was his answer!"



▲ ICA National Secretary, Shirley Power (centre), with members campaigning for a fair State Pension outside Leinster House.

## The ICA – For **all** women

**The Irish Countrywomen's Association is the largest women's organisation in Ireland with almost 10,000 members organised in more than 500 guilds right across the country, writes Colette Downing.**

Despite the name, the ICA is not just organised in rural Ireland and there are guilds in our biggest towns and cities. There are 30 guilds in Dublin alone, including our largest guild, which is based in Blanchardstown.

For generations the ICA has been a source of support, education, friendship and civic engagement for women all over Ireland.

As ICA members, we take practical action to help people in need and we work to ensure that women's interests and community values are represented at national level.

### **Campaigning**

Since its beginnings the ICA has always been a campaigning organisation. We were leading the way in struggles for access to electricity and clean water in the 1950s and 60s.

More recently we have been working for greater

access to breast and cervical cancer screening for women and campaigned alongside Age Action for a fair State Pension.

Our groups meet regularly to learn new skills and crafts. We participate in activities such as theatre productions, dancing competitions, pitch and putt and so much more.

Being a member of the ICA also entitles you to discounts at various stores, services and venues including, Hickey's, Shaws, the Guinness Hopstore and the National Concert Hall to name but a few.

If you are interested in meeting new people, sharing knowledge, learning and putting your energies to good use, then come join us.

**For further information on getting involved in the Irish Countrywomen's Association contact us on 01 668 0002, email us at [office@ica.ie](mailto:office@ica.ie) or visit our website, [www.ica.ie](http://www.ica.ie).**



# Secret ballot introduced for people with vision problems

Thousands of people who are blind or vision impaired will be able to vote in secret in the upcoming referendum for the first time.

Up to now, people with sight loss had to rely on others to help them exercise their franchise, which compromised their privacy.

A landmark High Court case taken by Dublin man Robbie Sinnott, who is vision impaired, cleared the way for a tactile mechanism to be used to allow people who are blind or visually impaired to vote independently.

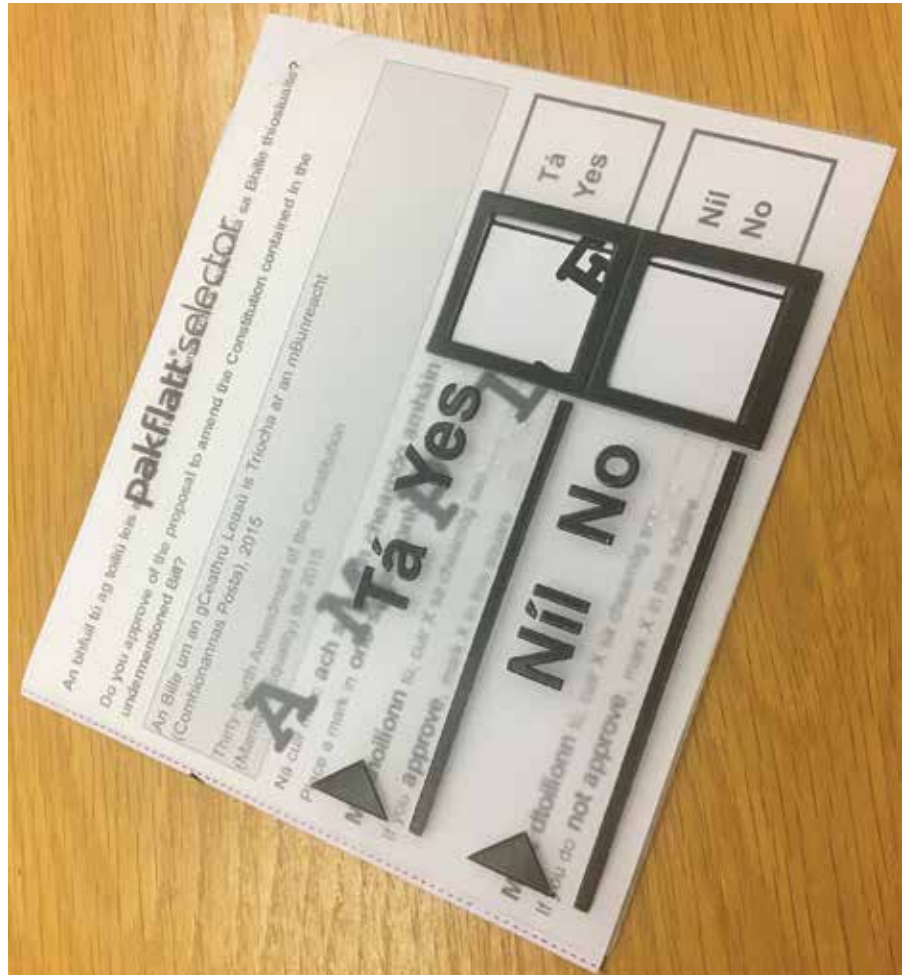
The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has produced a tactile 'ballot paper template', taking on board design recommendations from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland.

The template is a clear plastic device, which is placed over the ballot paper, and features raised lettering, large print and braille.

It also has cut out sections to assist people to find where to mark their vote and the templates will be available at every polling station around the country.

## Historic year

"This is an historic year for people who are blind or vision impaired," said Chris White, CEO of the National Council



for the Blind.

"Up to now their vote was not secret, they had to discuss their choice with somebody else and they could not even be sure that their preferred vote went into the ballot box.

"This situation was never acceptable to the NCBI and we are delighted that our recommendations have been taken on board by the Department."

Robbie Sinnott, whose successful High Court case forced the Government to act to ensure his right to vote in secret was protected, also welcomed the announcement.

"Up to this people with vision impairments had the right to vote in theory but the practice caused huge problems," he said.

"It was completely unacceptable that we had to ask people to come with us as we exercised our constitutional rights. I have looked forward to this day for so long."

**Templates will be available at NCBI offices nationwide for people who would like to try them out in advance of the referendum. Contact the NCBI for further information on 01 8307033 or [www.ncbi.ie](http://www.ncbi.ie).**

# Loneliness Taskforce launched

**ALONE, the charity that supports older people living alone, has joined with Senator Keith Swanick to form the Loneliness Taskforce, to coordinate a response to loneliness and social isolation in Ireland.**

The Loneliness Taskforce will produce a set of recommendations for the Government, state agencies and all policy makers. It is currently looking for interested individuals, groups and other organisations' input into a report.

The report will be published in the coming months and will focus on what is needed to tackle the issue of loneliness in Ireland.

"Loneliness is one of the greatest public health risks today," said Seán Moynihan, CEO of ALONE.

"One in every ten older people suffer from chronic loneliness, and the problem is now also prevalent in young people. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health and are worse for us than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity."

"We are asking interest groups and other organisations to submit short term, medium term and long term proposals that could make a significant change to the issue of loneliness in Ireland."

## Epidemic of loneliness

Last December, Fianna Fáil Seanad spokesperson on health and mental health Senator Dr Keith Swanick was the first to call for such a task force to be set up.

"The decision to establish the Loneliness Taskforce arises from a passion to address the



▲ Dr John Hillery, President of the College of Psychiatrists in Ireland, with Senator Dr Keith Swanick in Leinster House.

epidemic of loneliness and social isolation," he said.

"Every day of my professional life I meet people who are lonely and this loneliness can have a devastating impact on the mental and physical health of people, with corresponding challenges for public services to meet these demands.

"We know that loneliness never discriminates between young or old, between rich or poor and between urban or rural and the Loneliness Taskforce is working

to increase awareness about the issue and to produce a set of recommendations for Government, state agencies and all policy makers."

**Submissions or suggestions to the Loneliness Taskforce can be made via [www.lonelinesstaskforce.com](http://www.lonelinesstaskforce.com)**

**or by post to: Dr Keith Swanick, Chairperson of the Loneliness Taskforce, Seanad Éireann, Kildare Street, Dublin 2. The deadline for receipt of submissions is Monday 9th April 2018.**

## Homecare consultation report due this month

The Department of Health plans to publish a report this month on the submissions made to last year's public consultation on a statutory homecare scheme. The report will examine the feedback contained in more than 2,600 submissions.

"The consultation ended more than seven months ago so it's disappointing the process isn't more advanced," said Age Action's Justin Moran.

"But part of the reason for that is the huge number of submissions and we're delighted that so many Age Action members, including our Galway group, are playing their part in campaigning for a right to homecare."



▲ Campaigning for investment in homecare.

Photo: Maxwells

## U3A groups

### 📍 Active Virginians U3A

Patricia at (087) 235-0515

### 📍 An Cosán U3A Tallaght

Imelda at (01) 462-8488

### 📍 Ballymun U3A

Peter at (087) 292-4001

### 📍 Ballyroan U3A

June at (01) 494-7030

### 📍 Blackrock U3A

Eileen at (087) 418-8607

### 📍 Blessington U3A

Peter at (087) 815-1018

### 📍 Bray U3A

Linda at (086) 045-1600

### 📍 Carrick-on-Shannon U3A

Margaret at (086) 837-2934

### 📍 Club 50, Donegal U3A

Anne at Annegallagher60@yahoo.ie

### 📍 Dublin City U3A

John at (01) 201-7490

### 📍 Dun Laoghaire, Dalkey, Killiney U3A

Email dldk@gmail.com

### 📍 Maynooth U3A

Helena at (01) 628-5128.

### 📍 Lucan U3A

Mary at lucanu3a@gmail.com.

### 📍 Monaghan U3A

Eamonn at (087) 918-6567

### 📍 Newcastle, Dublin 22 U3A, Retired Active Men's Social

Matt at (01) 458-9007

### 📍 Roscommon U3A

Sam at (01) 475-6989

### 📍 Rusheen Woods, Galway, U3A

Angela at rusheenwoodsu3a@gmail.com

### 📍 Sligo U3A

Kathleen at katemf@eircom.net

### 📍 Sutton-Baldoyle U3A

Christine at (01) 832-3697

### 📍 Tramore U3A

Mollie at molliehunt@eircom.net

### 📍 Waterford U3A

Josephine at (051) 871-037

**For more information, email Sam O'Brien-Olinger, U3A Development Officer, at [u3a@ageaction.ie](mailto:u3a@ageaction.ie) or phone (01) 475-6989.**

# Pensions rise after three month delay

The State Pension increased by €5 at the end of March following the announcement made by Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection Regina Doherty TD in Budget 2018.

“This pension increase may be small but it is certainly welcome and particularly so for the tens of thousands of pensioners who rely entirely on the State Pension for their income,” said Age Action’s Justin Moran

“They are coming under enormous pressure from steadily increasing energy and health costs and the pension increase is a badly needed source of additional funds.”

While Age Action welcomed the increase when it was announced members were disappointed that, for the second year running, the increase was delayed almost three months.

Not everyone will get the €5 and dependent adults and those on reduced pension rates will get smaller amounts.

It means the top rate for the contributory State Pension will now be €253.30 a week for pensioners over 80 and €243.30 for those under 80.

The maximum non-contributory pension will be €242 a week for people aged over 80 and €232 for everyone else.

## Annual membership application

I wish to join Age Action and enclose € ..... membership fee, plus €..... voluntary donation payable to Age Action Ireland Ltd.

If you are already an existing Age Action member and wish to renew your membership, please write your membership number here

.....

Full name: ..... (Block capitals please)

Address:.....

Tel: .....

Email: ..... (Block capitals please)

Date: .....

### FEES

- €20 Individual – retired/unwaged
- €40 Individual – employed
- €60 Voluntary Body
- €200 Statutory Agency
- €500 Commercial

### STANDING ORDER

To the Manager (Name of Bank/Building Society) .....

.....

Bank Address: .....

.....

.....

Please pay annually to Age Action Ireland, Permanent TSB, 70 Grafton Street, Dublin 2, BIC: IPBSIE2D

IBAN: IE82 IPBS 9906 2587 7790 21

the following amount €..... until further notice. Starting on: 1st day of January 20 .....

Name: ..... (Block capitals please)

BIC: .....

IBAN:.....

Signature:.....

### Please return to:

Membership Development, Age Action Ireland Ltd, 30/31 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2. Email: membership@ageaction.ie Tel: (01) 475 6989 Fax: (01) 475 6011