



Registered Office: 30/31 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2, D02 EC96

Tel: +353 1 4756989 Fax: +353 1 4756011

Email: info@ageaction.ie Website: www.ageaction.ie

 Facebook: www.facebook.com/AgeActionIreland  Twitter: www.twitter.com/AgeAction

Submission to the Department of Education on the Statement of Strategy 2015 - 2017

June 3 2016

Age Action Ireland was established in 1992 as the national non-governmental organisations concerned with ageing and older people, acting as a network of organisations and individuals including older people and carers of older people, and as a development agency promoting better policies and services for older people. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by empowering them to live full lives as actively engaged citizens and to secure their rights to comprehensive high quality services according to their changing needs.

In order to further this mission we have a number of core objectives:

- To mobilise and empower older people to advocate on behalf of themselves, their families and their communities
- To change attitudes towards ageing and older people in Irish society
- To effect changes in legislation and policies by influencing Government, state agencies and the social partners
- To secure the right of older people to comprehensive high quality services and where necessary to initiate services
- To focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged older people

A central feature of our work is raising awareness about the lived experience of growing old in Ireland. This includes advocating for policy changes which will have a positive impact on older people. Other programmes of work include ageing in the developing world, promoting intergenerational solidarity and helping older people to develop computer skills.

Education and Lifelong Learning

It is stated in the Strategy that 'accommodating the rapid demographic growth in Ireland' and 'serving the ever evolving needs of our society' are some of the most important challenges Ireland faces today. However, there is no specific mention of an ever increasing older population¹. Lifelong learning, as a key part of Adult and Community Education, results in a range of positive outcomes for the growing number of older people in Ireland, including improvements to quality of life, reduced risk of social exclusion and

¹ the Central Statistics Office published their Population and Labour Force Projections for the period 2011-2041 which can be accessed at: http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/po_lab_project.htm

In it they state that 'In the short term (2011) the number of those 65+ will have increased about 16% rising to 40% by 2016. By 2026, the 65+ age group will have doubled and by 2041 it will have more than trebled what it was in 2006... in percentage terms the 85+ group will increase by over 25% by 2011, over 50% by 2016, nearly 100% by 2021 and by over 400% by 2041 (2011, 3).

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isolation, an overall increase in self-confidence and general well-being, keeping mentally and socially active and learning new skills.

Through Age Action's Lifelong Learning Programme we feed in to the important role that the *Further Education and Training Strategy* plays 'in helping people to lead fulfilling lives, supporting some of the hard-to-reach individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reducing the costs to society of exclusion' (Dept. of Education & Skills 2014, 21). We strongly believe that learning should not only be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired (the workplace). Instead, learning should also be understood as something that takes place on an ongoing basis in every aspect of our lives from cradle to the grave. Age Action's Lifelong Learning Programme instils this approach in the delivery of its aims and objectives, keeping older people active engaged citizens who make valuable contributions to their local communities.

According to the SOLAS report, *Lifelong Learning among Adults in Ireland Quarter 4 2014*, participation rates in lifelong learning in Ireland (7.3%) are below the EU average (10.5%) and they have been widening since 2009 (SOLAS 2015, 5). Ireland also lags significantly behind the top performing countries such as Denmark (31.4%), Sweden (28.1%) and Finland (24.9%). An EU education and training benchmark aim is to reach a participation rate in lifelong learning of 15% by 2020. In order to achieve this rate in Ireland, we believe that much greater investment is needed to ensure that lifelong learning continues to play a vital role in enabling people of all ages to participate in the human, social, economic and cultural development of Irish society. According to the *2015 Further Education and Training Plan* (SOLAS 2015, 43), less than €200,000 was invested in 'Lifelong Learning Opportunities' in 2015. Age Action feels that this investment falls short of what is required to see a social return and to meet the EU objective of a 15% participation rate in lifelong learning.

What do older learners say about Age Action's Education Programme?

<i>"I have found it a great way of meeting people of like mind and interests"</i>
<i>"Don't be afraid to start small. We were just a small group of people, most of whom had not previously met but who were interested in expanding their horizons. Now we have regular speakers, take field trips and go on overnight trips together."</i>
<i>"After working for close on 50 years I needed to know what was going on in the community - it is a completely different world and at times very frustrating, challenging – especially during the last seven year period of austerity and pension income cuts; increased taxation; cuts in health and other services etc. Coming to our U3A and Age Action meetings has helped me to survive".</i>
<i>"U3A helped me to explore new ideas and horizons, make new friends, experience the energy and enthusiasm for life of older people"</i>
<i>"U3A releases a whole new range of areas of interests that I never knew existed"</i>
<i>"I schedule this once a month meeting; summer visits and theatre visits into my diary – I refer to this as 'ME TIME'"</i>
<i>"Our activities and attitudes prove that we are more than our pathology or chronological age"</i>
<i>"Communication is better than medication"</i>

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Recommendations:

- The value of community-based lifelong learning initiatives must be recognised and funding increased to match the aspirations of the Department and the needs of older learners.
- Older people are addressed more as problematic [*sic*] regarding the areas of Health and Housing rather than as valuable individuals with learning needs and aspirations outside of re-entering employment. This inherently ageist approach to older people must change across Departments.
- Age Action shares the aspirations of **Goal 1: Learning for Life** and **Goal 3 - Supporting Inclusion and Diversity** so that Ireland truly has 'an education and training system that provides all learners with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society and the economy'. Older people from all backgrounds must therefore be included in the category of 'all learners' when designing and implementing any reforms. Older learners must be included more equally in participating in the education system.
- Age Action's Education Programme shares the Department's mission of facilitating 'individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development'². Older learners must continue to be included in this vision of individuals'³ who are making valuable contributions to the country's development. Age Action's *University of the 3rd Age (U3A) - Lifelong Learning and Generations Together Programmes* are funded by SOLAS to support a nationwide network of U3A groups, with approximately 1000 members and 20 groups, which are active within their local communities and operate on a voluntary basis. Like many other local community-led volunteering initiatives with a focus on education, the significant personal, social, cultural and economic dividends of the Department's investment in these programmes reaps considerable returns for people of all ages across the country. It is worth noting that these programmes compliment the work of the formal education sector's core functions of teaching and learning and require increased support from the Department.
- Age Action fully appreciates that the delivery of quality services with reduced resources continues to present challenges. The Secretary General's introduction states that from an internal Department perspective the significant work that will be undertaken by staff of the Department to achieve its high level goals '*will require flexibility*' and '*openness to change*'; two vital ingredients that will ultimately benefit the staff of the Department, as much as relevant stakeholders, especially older learners. In the spirit of the above, Age Action is committed to working in partnership with the Department with regard to monitoring our joint progress on the implementation of this Strategy and measuring the achievement of

² See <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Statement-of-Strategy-2015-2017.pdf> page 5.

³ *ibid*

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expected outcomes against older people's lived experiences. This must therefore include increased consultation with older people participating in lifelong learning opportunities and using a combination of quantitative metrics and qualitative data as equally important constituents of the evidence for our joint progress.

- A well-educated skilled and motivated population -that contributes to economic progress, promotes greater equality and social inclusion- should not have an age limit. Therefore older people's formal education and non-formal learning needs and aspirations ought to be more fully considered within the Statement of Strategy 2015 – 2017.
- Lifelong learning takes place across the life-course from the moment a child is born until the end of life. An objective of the National Positive Ageing Strategy is to “*promote access to a wide range of opportunities for continued learning and education for older people*” (DoH, 2013: 20). To achieve this objective we feel that greater recognition needs to be given to the importance of lifelong and intergenerational learning (formal and informal) in the development of policy, community development, and in the achievement of intergenerational equality and solidarity.
- Given the importance of lifelong learning as set out above, and in order to achieve the EU target, we call on the Department to increase the existing budgets available for lifelong learning opportunities and to realise the objective of the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* by providing additional support and resources for this work. We strongly believe that increased access to such opportunities can further the objective of making Ireland the best place in the world in which to grow old.

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