



**Submission to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government
on the draft document**

**Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in
Ireland**

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1. About Age Action

Overview

Age Action Ireland was established in 1992 as the national non-governmental organisation concerned with ageing and older people. We act 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 fundamentally change 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.

A central feature of our work is raising awareness about the lived experience of growing old in Ireland. This includes working with key decision-makers to develop policies that have a positive impact on older people.

We also raise awareness about a range of issues affecting older people in national and local media. Other programmes of work include ageing in the developing world and promoting intergenerational solidarity. Age Action has a national remit and in 2013 we delivered our services in 152 locations across Ireland.

Work at community level

We deliver a number of services and programmes at a local level. Firstly, we work with a diverse range of partners in the delivery of two programmes – Care and Repair and Getting Started.

The Care & Repair Programme was established by Age Action to carry out minor repairs for older and vulnerable people free of charge, to give them access to reliable tradesmen for larger jobs and to provide a befriending service.

The vision of the programme is to enable older and vulnerable people to remain in their own homes, in their own communities, living as independently as possible, through the improvement of their housing conditions and their level of comfort, security and well-being.

The programme is delivered by our staff and volunteers in Dublin, Cork City and Galway City. In order to make the programme available to older people throughout

the country, Age Action works with 34 community partners to train them to run the Age Action Care & Repair Programme in their localities with the support of Age Action staff.

The community group becomes a partner of Age Action and we work together to provide a high quality service to older people using the agreed standards and quality control of our Care & Repair Programme.

As part of our fight against digital exclusion, Age Action's Getting Started Programme delivers training on computers, tablets and smartphones to people over the age of 55.

Since 2006, Age Action has trained over 25,000 older people with the assistance of thousands of volunteer tutors. The training takes place in small classes and runs in libraries, community centres, family resource centres, corporate offices and housing complexes for older people.

Our Lifelong Learning Programme is also delivered at a community level. This programme incorporates two strands – The University of the Third Age and Generations Together. These programmes have a community education ethos and engage with people who may never have been involved in the formal education system.

Our approach is to increase social inclusion by guiding participants through an informal system of learning, knowledge and skills transfer that increases their self-confidence and 'sense of purpose'.

Finally, our Ageing and Development Programme works on global ageing and issues older people face in the global south. These include access to social protection, to health & HIV/Aids supports and the inclusion of older people in humanitarian response or emergency situations.

As part of our work we raise awareness about these issues with the general public, older people, politicians & policy-makers and development organisations in Ireland.

We do this through development education, producing materials, engaging in campaigns and building support among relevant stakeholders on ageing and development issues and the rights of older people. The programme is funded by Irish Aid and the EU and we partner with HelpAge International.

2. Comments on the Framework

Our work at community level is an integral part of our vision of Ireland becoming the best place in the world in which to grow older. We therefore welcome the opportunity to make a submission as part of the Department's consultation on the draft of *Our Communities: A Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland*.

Age Action welcomes the draft policy's vision of 'vibrant, sustainable, self-determining communities that have the social, cultural and economic well-being of all citizens at their core'. We welcome that the Framework refers to both the National Positive Ageing Strategy and the Irish National Dementia Strategy within its policy context.

We acknowledge that other groups are better placed to provide detailed comments on the entire Framework. Therefore, we have focussed our comments on Objective 1 of the Framework, which is most relevant to our work.

Comments on Objective 1 Engaging with Communities

We recognise that the Framework sets out high level objectives and that it is beyond its scope to set out specifics regarding how engagement is delivered and how specific target groups are included. However, we think it is imperative to outline the importance of ensuring that older people are included in consultations about their communities.

Active citizenship is an all-encompassing concept embracing formal and informal, political, cultural, interpersonal and caring activities¹. It incorporates consultation and involvement in decision-making that directly affects the person. The negative view of

¹Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) *The Concept of Active Citizenship*. Dublin: Secretariat of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship

retirement and older age as a time of withdrawal from society must be dispelled and we must examine how active citizenship applies to older people.

It is imperative that the contribution older people make (family carers, volunteers etc.) is acknowledged and that policies and practices are developed that encourage continued and increased participation.

Valuing people's experiences underpins this, as well as tackling negative perceptions of older age which fail to acknowledge the cultural, social, political and professional resource that older people represent.

The Framework and any subsequent action plans or strategies that come out of it should focus on the potential for wider involvement and not forget that older people are essential for the cohesion of communities² (AGE, 2006).

An integral aspect of participation is involvement in decision-making. Meaningful consultation is effective as it identifies real need. It can also be empowering for those involved. The active voice of older people in policy-making and decisions at local and national levels is important.

Social engagement through activity can help to maintain quality of life, promote social contact, combat loneliness and isolation, and encourage people to be active members of society.

It is also another way of supporting self-identity. Participation is associated with belonging. For most people, this develops first within a domestic context, then within a community and educational setting, and finally through occupational and leisure activities.

In this way participation can relate to paid and unpaid work; volunteering; active citizenship; involvement in decision-making/consultation; social inclusion and the prevention of isolation; intergenerational relationships; eradicating discrimination and ageism; and promoting life-long learning.

² Age: The European Older People's Platform (2006) *Towards a European Society for All Ages*. Brussels: AGE.

We note that the policy context of the Framework includes the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 which promotes and supports 'lifelong learning' for all who engage with FET and also a strong focus on social inclusion.

We believe that lifelong learning and community education play a key role in the community development processes described in the Framework. There is a strong relationship between community education and community development. They share a number of key principles, including social cohesion, inclusiveness, empowerment, participation and active citizenship.

Our work on raising awareness of development issues plays an important role in creating understanding of how local and global issues affect older people's lives. Development education enables participants to make connections between communities, and encourages us to bring global awareness, solidarity, inclusiveness and resilience to local issues

The skills and increased confidence gained through programmes such as Getting Started and lifelong and intergenerational learning more generally can bring great benefits for our ageing European societies.

They can empower people, improve well-being and personal health, enhance employability, reduce social exclusion and promote independent living – all vital components of a healthy community.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Age Action recommends:

- Age Action recommends that any subsequent action plans or strategy documents that fall out of this Framework specifically identify older people as a target group to engage with.
- Ensure that older people are included within all representative structures, such as Public Participation Networks (PPNs).
- Support community education as a tool in the development of vibrant, sustainable and participative communities through sustainable funding

streams and consultation and collaboration with community education organisations.

- Specific inclusion of development education, and integration of development education practice into all Local and Economic Community Plans (LECPs).

ENDS

10 April 2015